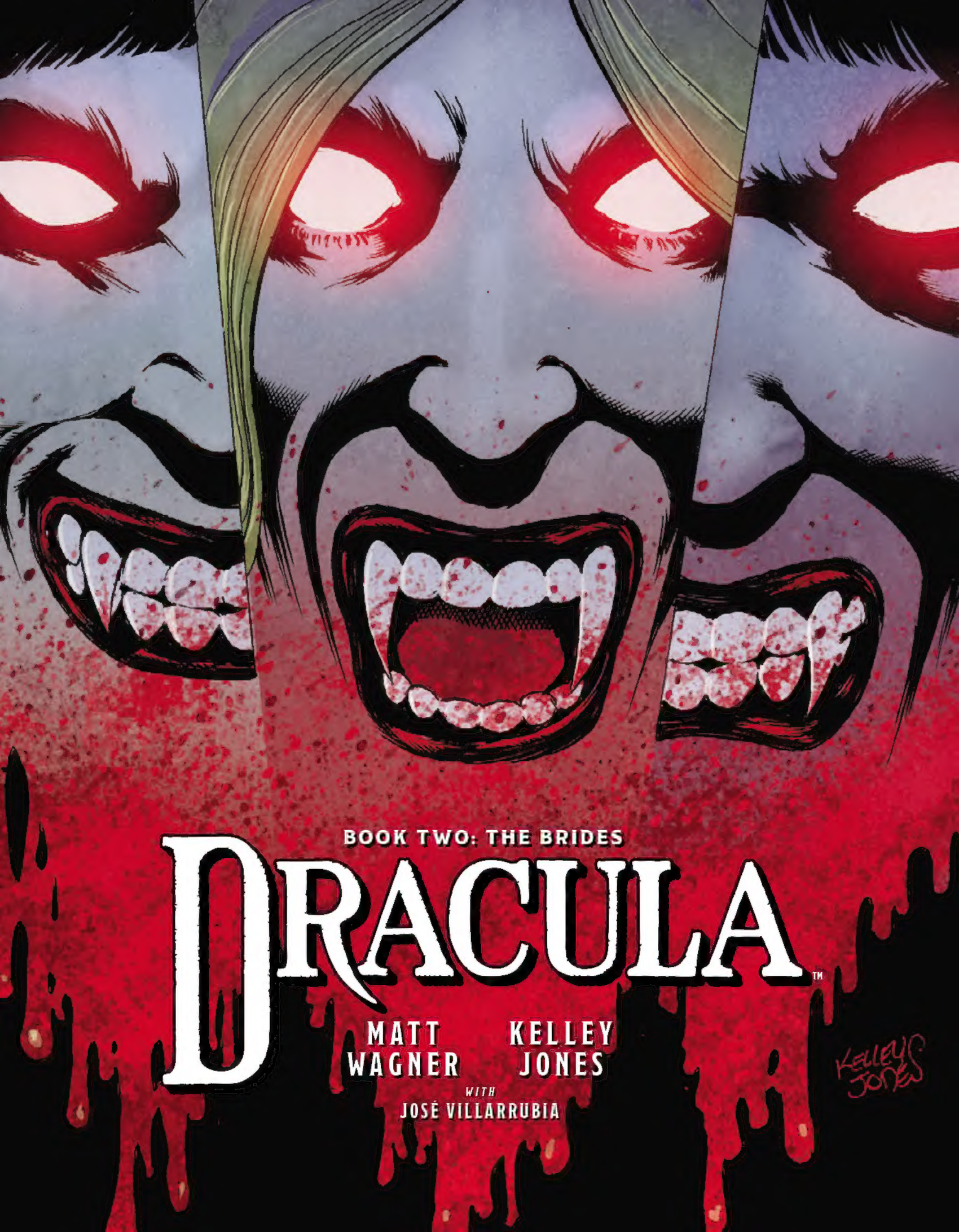
BOOK TWO: THE BRIDES
DRACULA™
MATT WAGNER
KELLEY JONES
WITH
JOSÉ VILLARRUBIA
KELLEY JONES

DRACULA

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DRACULA BOOK TWO: THE BRIDES™
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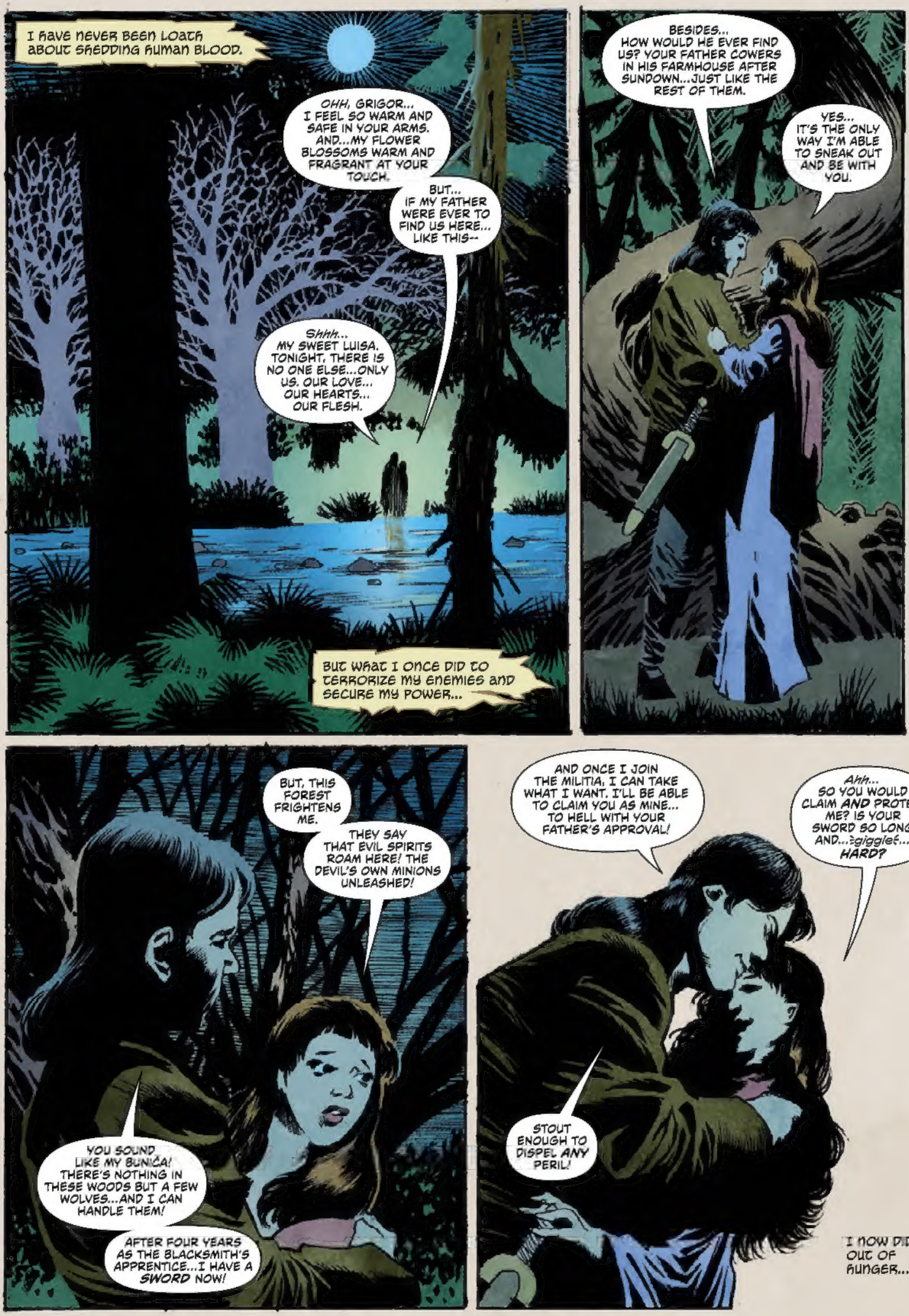
There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. They whispered together and then they all three laughed—such a silvery, musical laugh but as hard as though the sound could've never come through the softness of human lips. The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. One said:

"Go on! You are first and we shall follow; yours is the right to begin." The other one added:

"He is young and strong; there are kisses for us all." The fair girl went on her knees and bent over me, fairly gloating. I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and the red tongue as it lapped the sharp white teeth.

—Bram Stoker

TRANSYLVANIA.
"THE LAND BEYOND THE WOODS."
THE LAND THAT HAD BECOME MY REFUGE SINCE MY TRANSFORMATION INTO SOMETHING MORE THAN HUMAN.
THE LAND WHEREIN I LAID CLAIM TO A CASTLE STRONGHOLD THAT MY FATHER HAD ONCE OCCUPIED.
THE LAND LONG FEARED AND FOUGHT OVER BY THE RULERS OF BOTH THE HUNGARIAN AND OTTOMAN EMPIRES.
THE LAND WHERE THE FORCES OF DARKNESS WERE SAID TO RUN RAMPANT AMONG THE DENSE AND SHADOWY HIGHLANDS.
THE LAND WHERE I NOW HUNTED.


I have never been loath about shedding human blood.
Ohh, Grigor... I feel so warm and safe in your arms. And...my flower blossoms warm and fragrant at your touch.
But... if my father were ever to find us here... like this--
Shhh... my sweet Luisa. Tonight, there is no one else...only us. Our love... our hearts... our flesh.
But what I once did to terrorize my enemies and secure my power...
Besides... how would he ever find us? Your father cowers in his farmhouse after sundown...just like the rest of them.
Yes... it's the only way I'm able to sneak out and be with you.
But, this forest frightens me.
They say that evil spirits roam here! The devil's own minions unleashed!
You sound like my Bunica! There's nothing in these woods but a few wolves...and I can handle them!
After four years as the blacksmith's apprentice...I have a SWORD now!
And once I join the militia, I can take what I want. I'll be able to claim you as mine... to hell with your father's approval!
Ahh... so you would claim AND protect me? Is your sword so long and...giggle... HARD?
Stout enough to dispel ANY peril!
I now did out of hunger...

...and need.
HAVE A CARE, BOY.
ONLY A FOOL MOCKS THE CAUTION OF HIS ELDERS... AND DISMISSES THE DARK MYSTERIES THAT ROAM FREE IN THESE WOODS.
FAH! KEEP YOUR DISTANCE, STRANGER. I HAVE NO FEAR OF CUTTHROATS AND THIEVES.
MY BLADE WILL STRIKE DOWN ANY SUCH COWARDS!
A PEASANT WITH A SWORD IS BUT A STINGING GNAT. YOUR STEEL IS NOT WHETTED FOR THE LIKES OF ME, BUMPKIN.
YOU WERE WARNED, BRIGAND--!
EH?!
I...?
=URK=--
IT WAS NOT I WHO FAILED TO HEED THE SCENT OF DANGER.

WHEN I FIRST RECEIVED SATAN'S DARK BLESSING, I WAS POSSESSED OF A RAVENOUS HUNGER FOR BLOOD.

AHH-GK--!
CHK
I FED NEARLY EVERY NIGHT.
BUT I SOON REALIZED HOW QUICKLY THAT WOULD DEPLETE THE HERD OF MY POTENTIAL PREY. HUMANS CANNOT REPRODUCE NEARLY AS FAST AS I CAN REAP THEM.
IN TIME, I LEARNED TO CURB MY CRAVINGS AND HUNT ONLY WHEN CRUCIAL.
GRIGOR! N-NO... NOOOOO!
ONLY WHEN MY LUST FOR THE RUBY SAP APPROACHES MADNESS.

NO! S-SOMEBODY...
AS A LAST RESORT, THE BLOOD OF ANIMALS CAN SUSTAIN ME.
AND, ALTHOUGH BETTER THAN CATTLE, THE JUICE OF MEN HOLDS LITTLE APPEAL.
SOMEBODY HELP ME!
THERE IS AN ACRID, ASSERTIVE TANG IN THE GORE OF MALES.
PLEASE... P-PAPA...
ITS CONSUMPTION LEAVES ME VEXED AND RESTLESS.
PAPA... HELP ME!!
STILL...EVEN THE BLOOD OF THE LOWEST VERMIN EXCEEDS ANY DELICACY I ENJOYED WHILST STILL AMONG THE LIVING.
PAPA... OH!
WITH ONE LUSCIOUS STRAIN TRANSCENDENT ABOVE ALL THE REST.

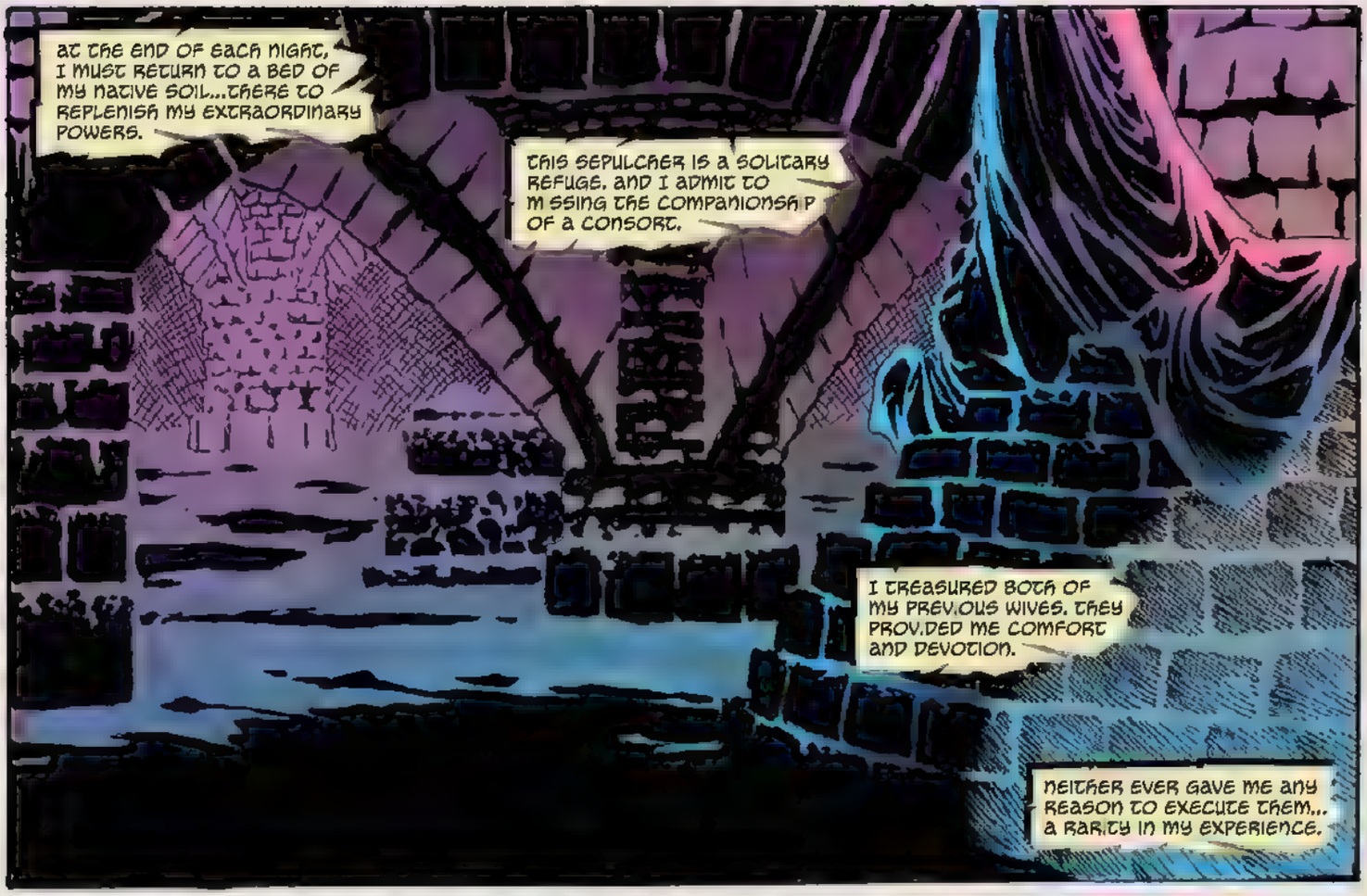
there is nothing i have ever tasted or imagined as sweet and succulent as the lifeblood of *women*.
a woman in the full bloom of her sex, most especially.
too young and the claret is thin and unr.pened.
too old and the v.brant piquancy smacks faded and flat.
the euphoria it brings surpasses any worldly pleasure i have ever known.
no bedding... no battlefield victory... no base intoxication even compares.
my yearning is great this evening... and so i drain her of every drop.

her vivid essence churns through me with a sublime delirium. her death... is sheer ecstasy.
and yet... i must concede her intrepid mettle.
such actions speak of an audacious spirit.
perhaps strong enough... to have been a warlord's companion.
men will follow their wanton lust down any reckless path.
but a girl who would brave these woods at night and defy her father's will...
still, i am only too aware of what rises from the fatal effects of my deadly kiss.
an all-but mindless revenant... a festering shadow of the life that had once been.
and so i summon my servants to dispatch her sad remains... my ravenous children of the night.
let the crows have her tin soldier paramour.

It has been many decades since my rebirth in the aftermath of *the devil's* dark baptism.
since I became what the fearful peasants claim as "un-dead"...*nosferatu.*
as always, the rabble's superstitions betray their ignorance.
In almost every way, I am more *alive* now than on any day prior to my preternatural demise.
I am more powerful than I had ever dreamed of becoming.
a master of darkness, foresworn of God.
a fearsome and deadly *vampire.*
satan cast me out of the shadows as his earthly emissary.
there to rain terror o'er the lives and fortunes of mortal men.

YET, DESPITE ALL MY POWER, I AM YOKED BY THE BOUNDS OF MY CORPORALITY... AND THE POLITICAL SCHISMS THAT HAVE ARISEN IN MY ABSENCE.
ALLIANCES FORGED WITH OTHER VOIVODES HAVE ALL SOURED AND THE WEAKENED HUNGARIAN CROWN NOW PLEDGES FEALTY TO THE ACCURSED OTTOMANS.
FOLLOWING THEIR SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS THROUGH THE CARPATHIAN HIGHLANDS, THE VILE TURKS HAVE BEEN CONTENT TO WITHDRAW THEIR MILITARY PRESENCE.
RELYING ON THE SPINELESS SUBSERVIENCE AND ANNUAL TRIBUTES FROM THEIR CONQUERED VASSAL LORDS.
MY DOMINION IS LIMITED TO LITTLE MORE THAN THE SURROUNDING FORESTS AND THE MOUNTAIN VILLAGE OF TIHUTA.
SITUATED AT THE EASTERN BASE OF THE BORGO PASS.
TO THE WEST, BUCOLIC BISTRIÇA BORDERS MY REALM...EVER FEARFUL OF THE SHADOWS I CAST.
STILL...AS ALWAYS, I STRIVE AND SCHEME FOR MY ENEMIES' ANNIHILATION.

THE TIME IS RIPE TO SEIZE COMMAND OF ALL THE SURROUNDING PRINCIPALITIES.
I NEED ONLY THE SUPPORT OF A FEW OTHER WARLORDS OR BOYARS...BE THEY SAXON, WALLACH, MAGYAR OR SZEKELY.
MY OWN VASSALS ARE LOYAL TO THE MAN.
MILORD, I... I SEE YOU ARE RETURNED, EVEN THOUGH THE HOUR IS LATE. I WISH TO REPORT...THE KEEP IS MAINTAINED AND ORDERLY.
EVEN THOUGH THE RAT PROBLEM IN THE LOWER LEVELS PERSISTS.
THANK YOU, FENIX. YOUR EFFORTS IN MY SERVICE ARE MOST COMMENDABLE.
YOU REMEMBER, FENIX? HOW SHODDY AND ABANDONED THIS CASTLE WAS WHEN WE FIRST ARRIVED THOSE MANY YEARS AGO?
THAT WAS MY FATHER, LORD DRACULA. I AM HIS SON.
NOW, IF IT PLEASE MILORD... YOUR NEW CHAMBERMAID, MY DAUGHTER, SEEKS TO CLEAN THIS LIBRARY. SHE... WAS FEARFUL TO ENTER HERE WITHOUT YOUR PERMISSION.
YES...OF COURSE. ENTER FREELY, GIRL.
IT IS TIME THAT I RETIRE ANYWAY.
THANK YOU, LORD.
THE GYPSY TROOP BEQUEATHED TO ME BY SATAN HIMSELF HAVE PROVEN STEADFAST, CAPABLE...AND, IN SOME CASES, SURPRISINGLY ALLURING.


at the end of each night, I must return to a bed of my native soil...there to replenish my extraordinary powers.
this sepulcher is a solitary refuge. and I admit to m ssing the companionsh p of a consort.
I treasured both of my prev.ous wives. they prov.ded me comfort and devotion.
neither ever gave me any reason to execute them... a rar.ty in my experience.

certainly, every aristocrat knows the isolation of their title. camaraderie is the purview of soldiers and peasants.
yet I also know the ghastly results of trying to create another such as myself. for who else could share my crypt?

surely, these walking dead would make unsavory bedmates.

THE SPELLCRAFT I ACQUIRED SO EASILY AT THE SCHOLOMANCE IS NOW LIMITED.
DESPITE HAVING AMASSED A HUGE COLLECTION OF GRIMOIRES, THE MYSTIC WRITINGS CONTAINED THEREIN FAIL TO REVEAL THE PROBLEM THAT VEXES ME MOST...
HOW TO PASS ALONG THE GIFT OF BOTH MY VAMPIRISM AND MY COGNIZANCE?
THE DEVIL'S MIRROR, AN ARTIFACT I MANAGED TO SAVE FROM THE DAYS OF HIS TUTELAGE, MIGHT PROVIDE THE ANSWER.
BUT I AM RETICENT TO SPEND ONE OF MY TWO REMAINING INQUIRIES OF IT JUST YET.
EVEN AS IT OFFERS NO REFLECTION OF MY UNDEAD COUNTENANCE...
IT REMAINS SILENT AS ANY OTHER GLASS.
MILORD... IT HAS BEEN SIX MONTHS. THE LIBRARY COULD USE CLEANING AGAIN. MIGHT I...?
AYE, GIRL... ENTER FREELY. DO AS YOU WILL.

I am a creature of conquest.
Even while alive, the mundanity of ruling was never to my liking.
Still, my status as local *voivode* requires that I periodically consider an airing of grievances... a tiresome recitation of petty squabbles and malcontents' vanities.
NEXT!

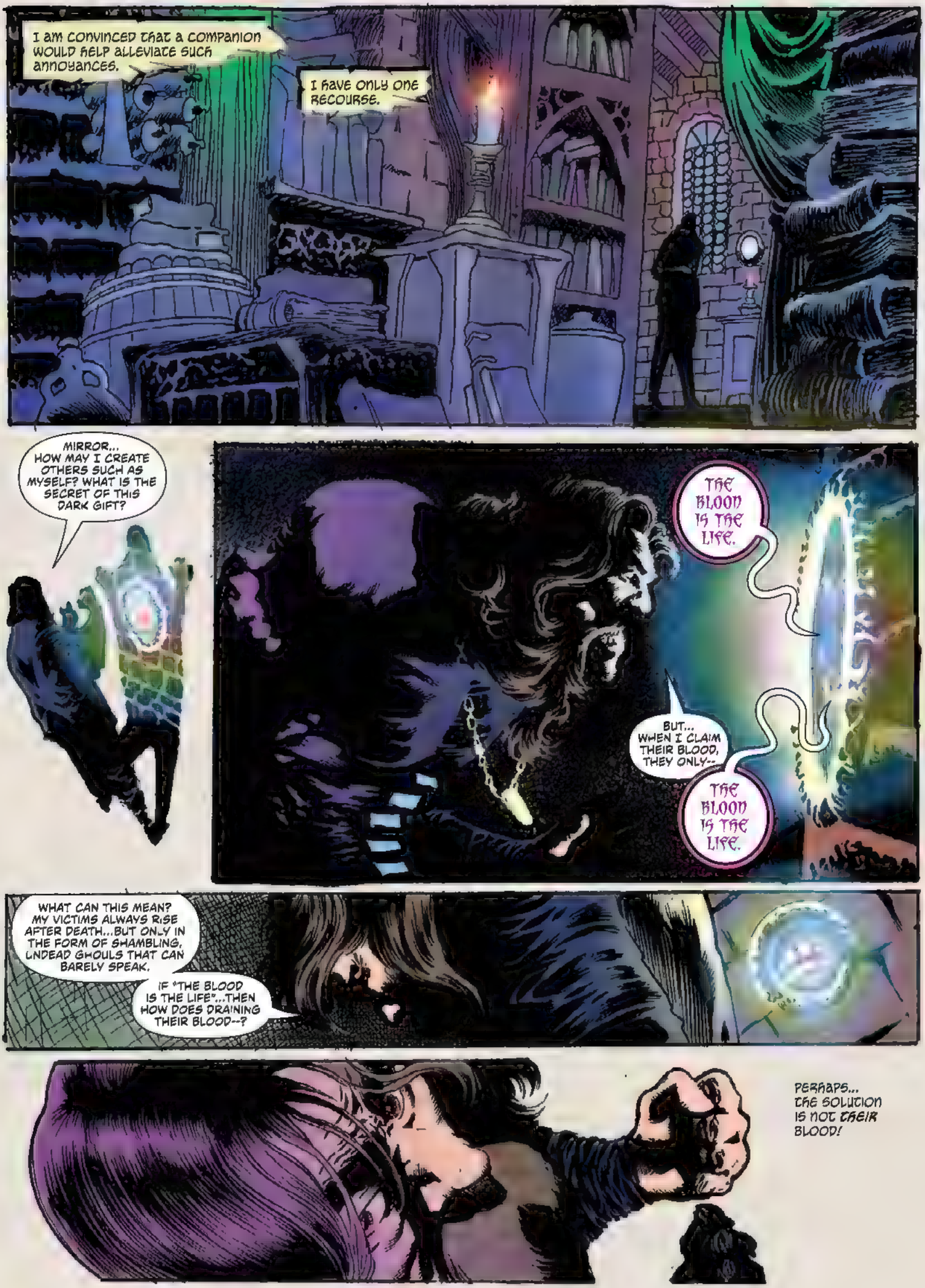
and being active during daylight hours always renders me peevish and agitated.
STATE YOUR CASE...SO THAT THE THRONE MAY ADJUDICATE YOUR CLAIMS.

...AND SO, YOU SEE, MILORD, THE GRAZING LANDS NORTH OF *FELLER'S POINT* HAVE LONG BEEN THE HEREDITARY RIGHTS OF *MY* FAMILY AND--
THAT'S *NOT TRUE*, MILORD *DRACULA!* THOSE FIELDS WERE GIVEN TO *MY* FATHER'S BROTHER BY THE *BOYAR* OF THAT DAY. *THIS* GREEDY BASTARD HAS NO--

ENOUGH! YOUR PRATTLING LANDS ON MY EARS LIKE THE CLASHING OF ROCKS!
BAH...THIS IS NO CONCERN FOR YOUR VOIVODE! ITS BANALITY DISGUSTS ME!
BUT, MILORD... THIS MATTER HAS LONG BEEN IN DISPUTE AND NEEDS BE--
SILENCE, CRETIN! SAVE YOUR COMPLAINTS FOR THE VILLAGE MAGISTRATE!
EH...YES, MILORD. BUT, STILL...WE ONLY NEED FOR YOU TO--
YOUR NEEDS... ARE AT AN END!
URK--!
SCHUNK

HERE IS MY JUDGMENT!
THUNK

AS I SAID...I HAVE LITTLE PATIENCE FOR SUCH TEDIUMS.
DAMNATION UPON ALL OF YOU! HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN WHAT MY ENEMIES ONCE CALLED ME?!
BEGONE...BEFORE I HAVE HALF OF THE VILLAGE IMPALED AND THE OTHER HALF CASTRATED!!
ȚEPEȘ!
A FACT THAT HAS LONG MARKED THE TENOR OF MY RULE.


I am convinced that a companion would help alleviate such annoyances.
I have only one recourse.
MIRROR... HOW MAY I CREATE OTHERS SUCH AS MYSELF? WHAT IS THE SECRET OF THIS DARK GIFT?
THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE.
BUT... WHEN I CLAIM THEIR BLOOD, THEY ONLY--
THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE.
WHAT CAN THIS MEAN? MY VICTIMS ALWAYS RISE AFTER DEATH...BUT ONLY IN THE FORM OF SHAMBLING, UNDEAD GHOULS THAT CAN BARELY SPEAK.
IF "THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE"...THEN HOW DOES DRAINING THEIR BLOOD--?
PERHAPS... THE SOLUTION IS NOT THEIR BLOOD!

I must begin... with an experiment.
But WHO will be my first subject? With whom shall I share...ETERNITY?
There is a longing in your eyes, girl. What is it you desire?
You have so many books and scrolls, milord...as is proper for one of noble birth.
But... part of me wishes that I could learn to read. To find meaning in all those strange symbols...it seems like magic!
But my people find such things frivolous and prideful. We are made to serve.
Such is the way of things, indeed. But, what if... I were to teach you to read?

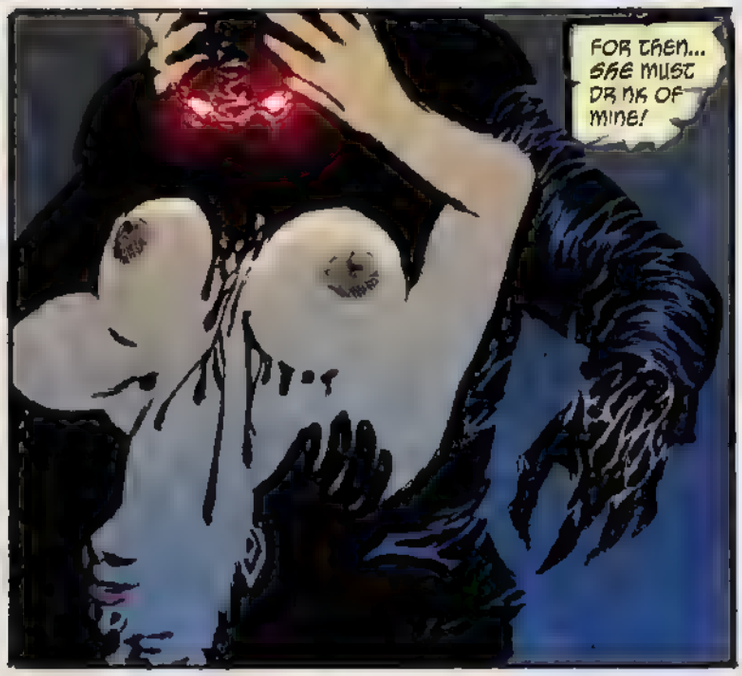
YOU MOCK ME, MILORD. I AM BUT A SCULLERY MAID, ONE OF YOUR LOYAL TRIBE OF VASSALS.
WHY WOULD YOU TEACH ME TO READ? BESIDES, IT WOULD TAKE SO LONG...
MY REASONS ARE MY OWN AND I DO AS I PLEASE.
WHAT IF I COULD GRANT YOU ALL THE TIME IT WOULD TAKE? ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD...
THEN... THAT WOULD BE A MIRACLE, MILORD. BUT I THINK EVEN YOU COULD NOT SUMMON SUCH A DREAM.
DO MY STATUS AND POWER NOT FRIGHTEN YOU, GIRL?
KNOW YOU NOT WHAT COMES TO THOSE WHO REFUSE ME?
OF COURSE I KNOW. THE LAST SUCH OFFENDER'S BODY STILL HANGS FROM THE RAFTERS OF YOUR THRONE ROOM.
AND IT IS LEFT TO ME TO CLEAN UP WHAT SLOWLY DISLODGES FROM HIS REMAINS. WHATEVER THE CROWS THAT MANAGE TO SLIP INSIDE THE CASTLE DO NOT CLAIM...
YES, I...HADN'T REALIZED--

BUT ONE SUCH AS HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO PESTER AND VEX HIS SOVEREIGN LORD.
FOR IF THE RUMORS AND WHISPERS ARE TRUE...THE MEAGER CONCERNS OF EVERYDAY FOLKS MUST BE INSIGNIFICANT TO ONE SUCH AS YOU.
I ALSO CLEAN YOUR BEDCHAMBER. I KNOW THE BED IS NEVER SLEPT IN. MY PEOPLE HAVE SERVED YOU FOR GENERATIONS.
WHATEVER YOU TRULY ARE, MILORD...YOU DO NOT FRIGHTEN ME.
WHAT IS YOUR NAME, GIRL?
IRINA, MILORD.
COME TO ME, IRINA! SUBMIT TO MY DARK EMBRACE!
Y-YES, MILORD...
MY COMMAND IS NO SORCERY LEARNED OF SATAN'S TUTELAGE.

such enchantment is the native power of a predator and its quarry--a *vampire's* seduction.

what better candidate for my vital test than one of my own retainers? especially one so forthright.
you are indeed fear-less, sweet irina. and now you shall become...wedded to *fear itself!*
a-as you command, milord.
as befits my passion, i will drink all but the final vestiges of her blood.

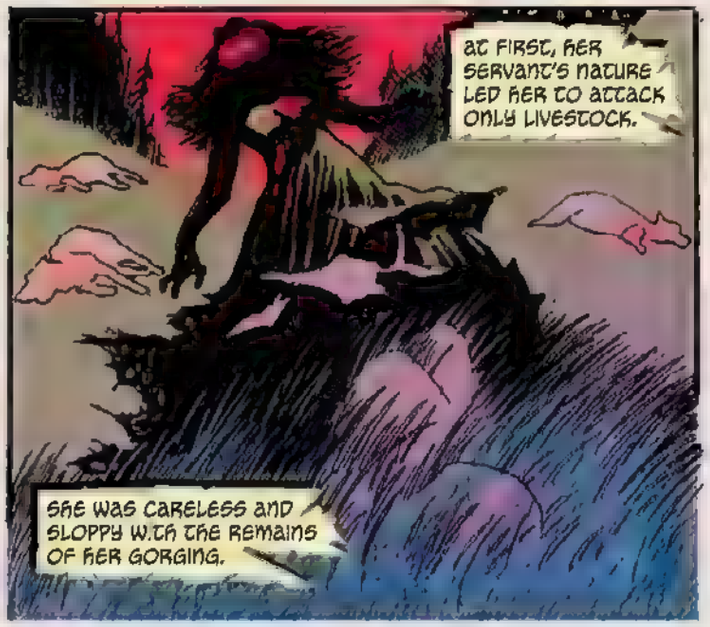
taking her to the very brink of cold, unyielding death!
y-your will be done...


for then... *she* must drink of mine!

THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE!
AND THUS I ACQUIRED THE FIRST OF MY BRIDES. A COMPANION TO WALK BY MY SIDE IN THE SHADOWS.
MINE TO COMMAND. MINE TO MAINTAIN.
MINE TO DO WITH... AS I PLEASED.

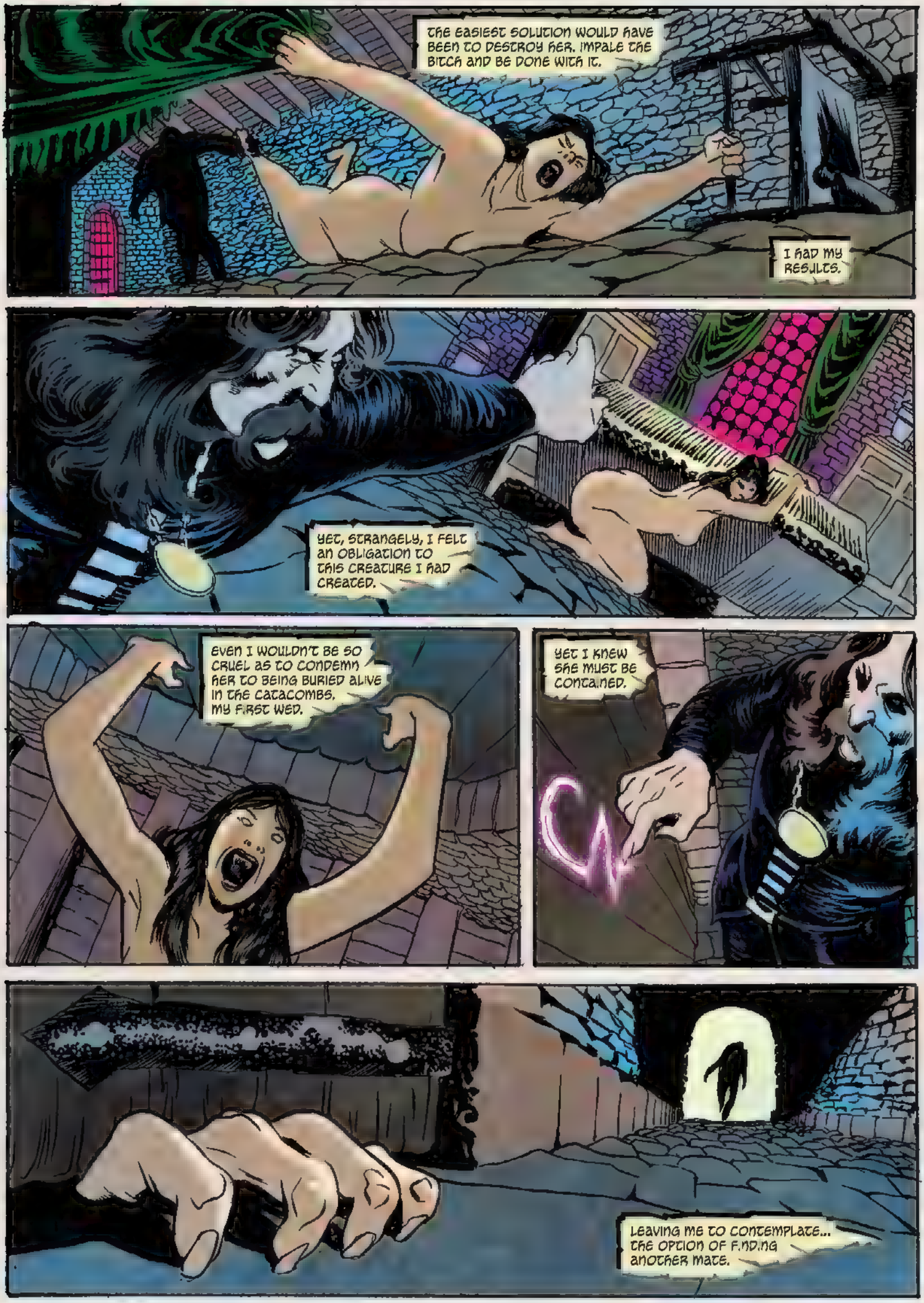
ALAS...OURS WAS NOT A CONGENIAL PA.RING.
ONCE TURNED AND RISEN, IRINA SHOWED LITTLE INTEREST IN HER SUPPOSED "DREAM" OF READING.

SEEMINGLY, HER ONLY DES RE... WAS TO FEED.


AT FIRST, HER SERVANT'S NATURE LED HER TO ATTACK ONLY LIVESTOCK.
SHE WAS CARELESS AND SLOPPY W.TH THE REMAINS OF HER GORGING.

FINALLY, SHE PREYED ON ONE OF HER OWN... A FELLOW SERVANT FROM MY GYPSY TR.BE.
A TRANSGRESSION I COULD NOT ALLOW...
CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER.

KRAK
FOR THE MOST PART, HER FERAL INSTINCTS WERE EASY TO CONTAIN.
SHE WAS, AFTER ALL, STILL A VASSAL AND KNEW HER PLACE.
FORGIVE ME, LORD...I AM YOUR LOYAL SUBJECT.
SURPRISINGLY, FENIX NEVER ASKED ABOUT OR REMARKED ON H.S DAUGHTER'S SUDDEN D.SAPPEARANCE.
EVEN THOUGH HE ALMOST CERTAINLY CAUGHT GLIMPSES OF HER AROUND THE CASTLE AT NIGHT.
BUT HE TOO KNEW HIS PLACE.
HER MOODS WERE VOLATILE, FROM LANGUID TO HYSTERICAL IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.
ALL TOO SOON, I GREW WEARY OF HER COMPANY AND REGRETTED MY CHOICE OF BRIDE.

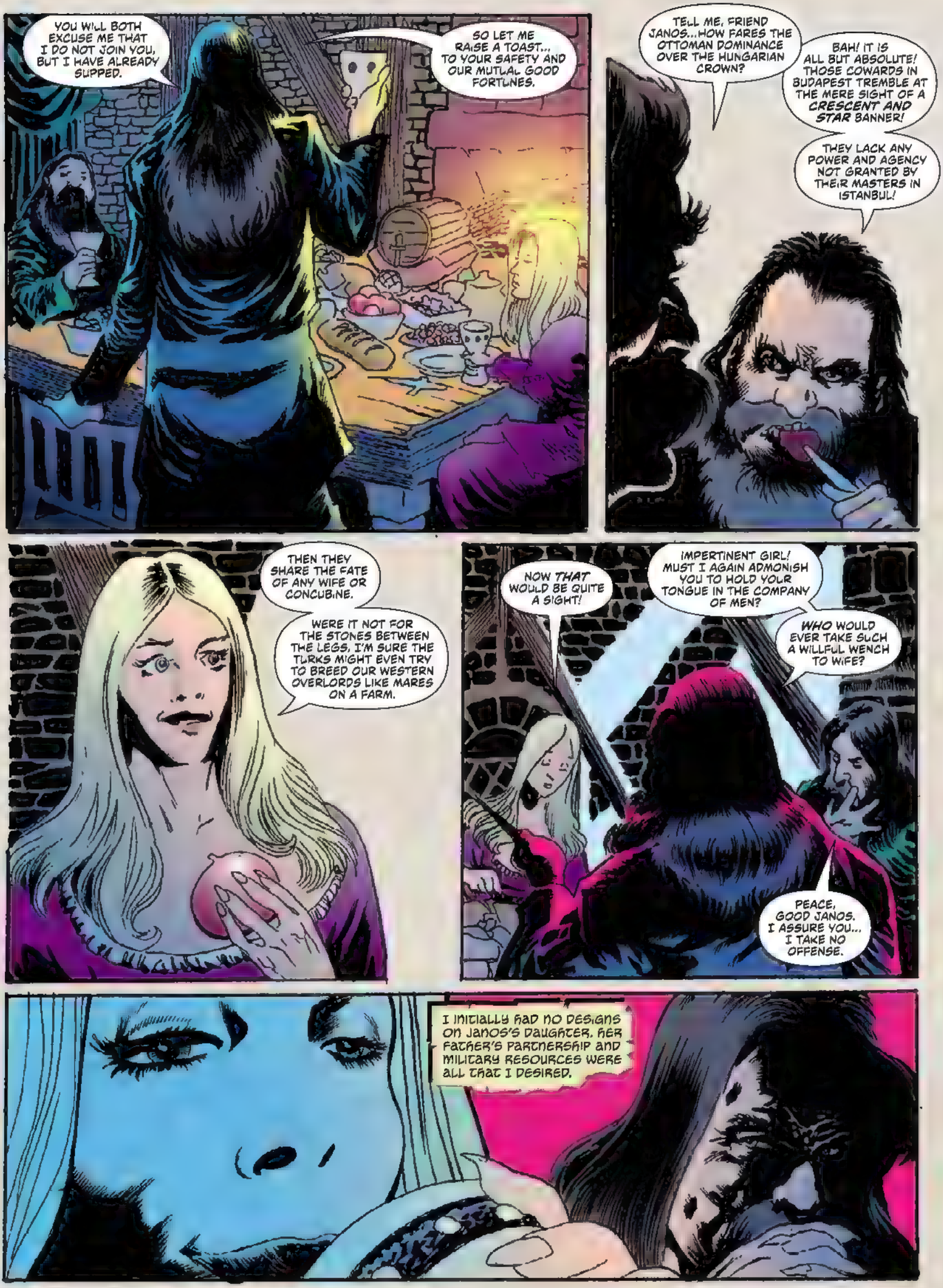

THE EASIEST SOLUTION WOULD HAVE BEEN TO DESTROY HER. IMPALE THE BITCH AND BE DONE WITH IT.
I HAD MY RESULTS.
YET, STRANGELY, I FELT AN OBLIGATION TO THIS CREATURE I HAD CREATED.
EVEN I WOULDN'T BE SO CRUEL AS TO CONDEMN HER TO BEING BURIED ALIVE IN THE CATACOMBS. MY FIRST WED.
YET I KNEW SHE MUST BE CONTAINED.
LEAVING ME TO CONTEMPLATE... THE OPTION OF FINDING ANOTHER MATE.

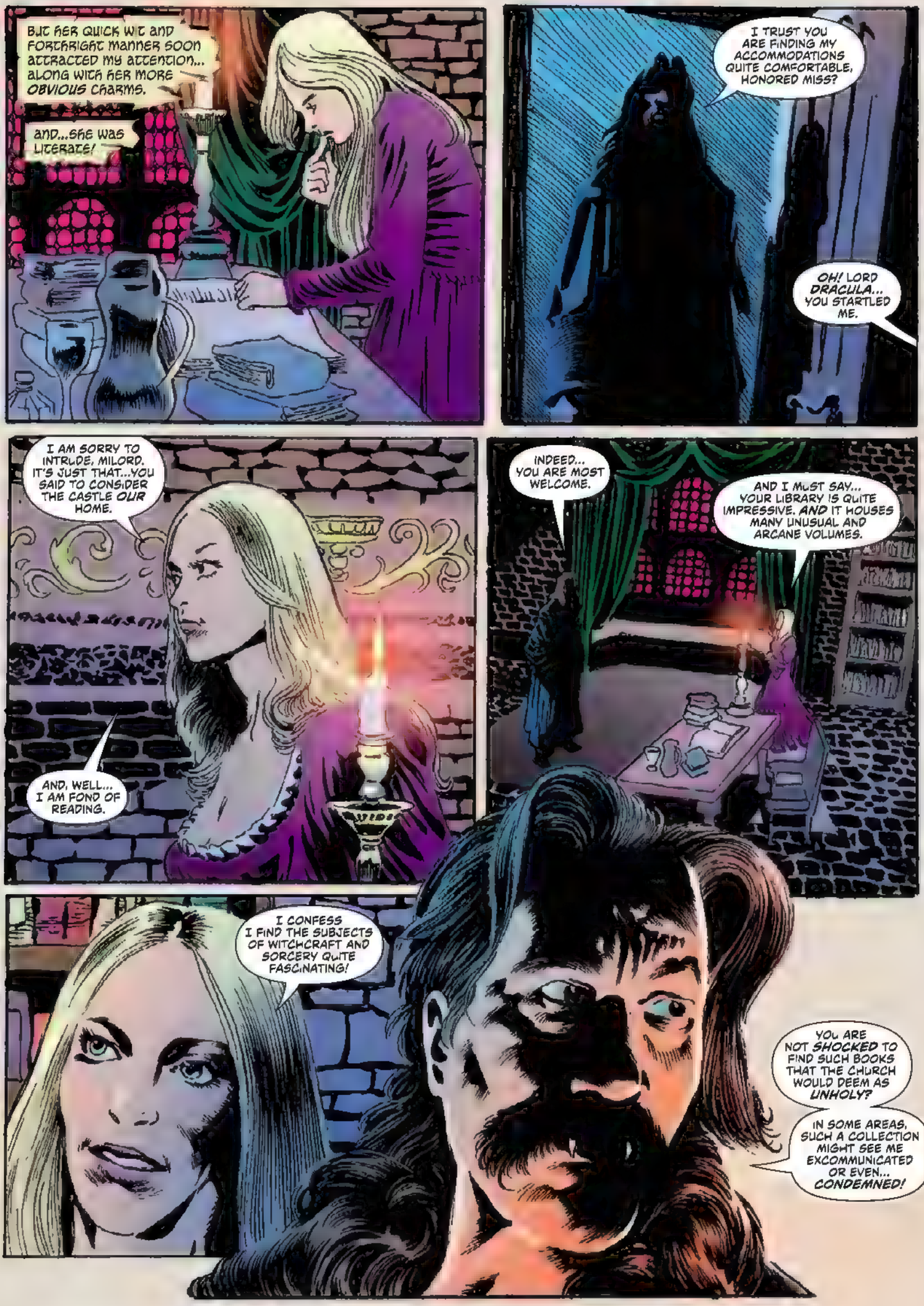
MORE DECADES PASSED. YEARS OF FEUDAL DISPUTES AND REGIME CHANGES THROUGHOUT THE CARPATHIAN KINGDOMS.
AND THEN, FINALLY... A POTENTIAL ALLIANCE PRESENTED ITSELF. A WARLORD WHO HAD REFUSED TO BEND THE KNEE TO THE OTTOMAN SUPREMACY.
...CAST OUT OF HIS HOMELAND AND HOUNDED INTO RETREAT. HIS EMISSARIES REACHED OUT TO ME AS A SOURCE OF REFUGE.

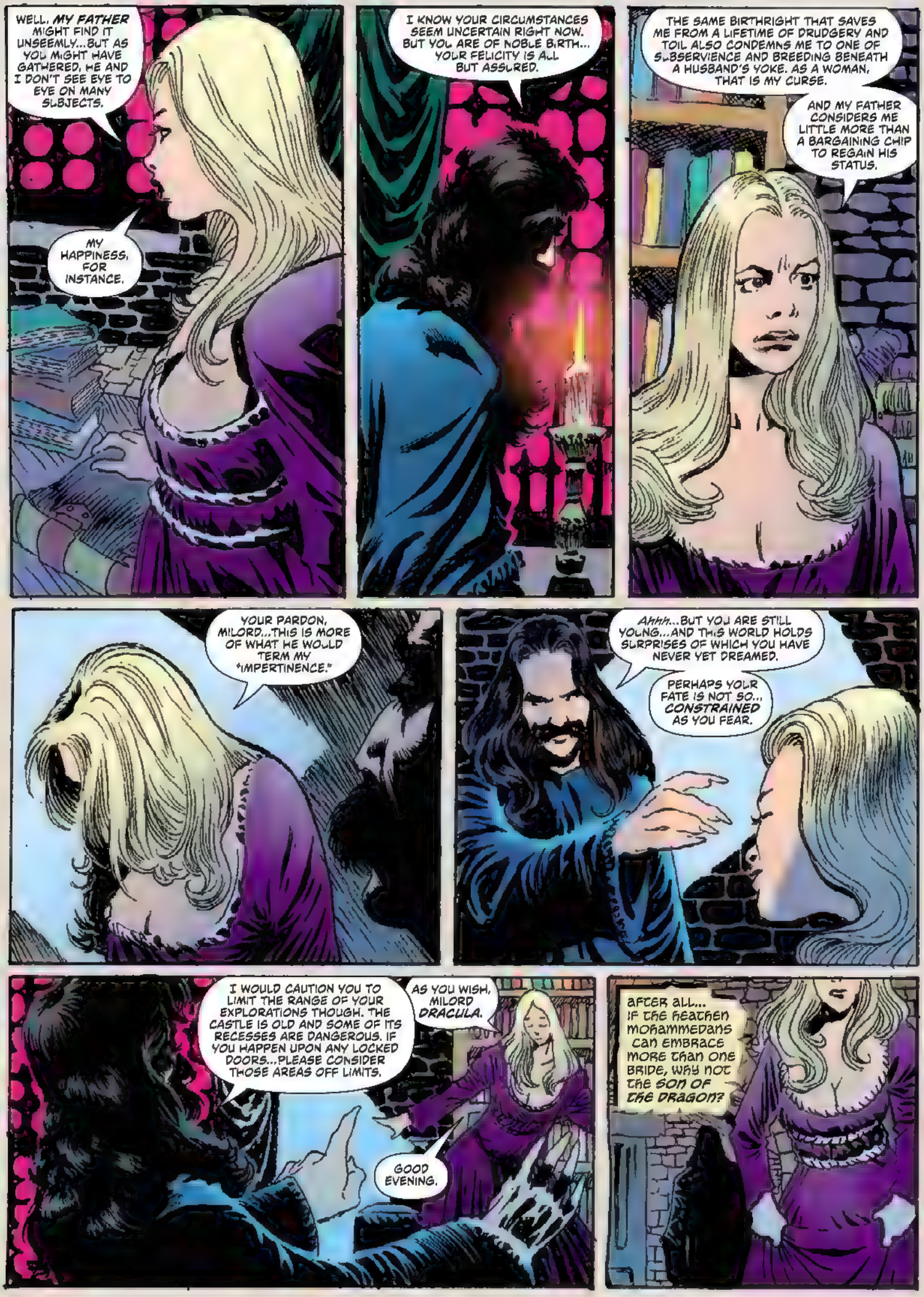
AN OFFER I GRACIOUSLY EXTENDED.

JANOS CORVINUS WAS VOIVODE OF A REGION IN SOUTHEASTERN MOLDAVIA. HIS GRANDFATHER HAD KNOWN MY FATHER.
BUT HE HAD FALLEN OUT OF FAVOR WITH THE HUNGARIAN CROWN AND SO WAS FORCED TO FLEE HIS HOMELAND.

A WIDOWER, CORVINUS ESCAPED WITH THE CORE OF HIS HOUSEHOLD SERVANTS AND A BATTALION OF HIS MOST LOYAL TROOPS.
AS WELL AS HIS ONLY DAUGHTER.
WELCOME, JANOS CORVINUS, TO YOU AND ALL YOUR RETINUE.
WELCOME... TO CASTLE DRACULA!
FUCK THOSE CURSED TURKS WHO HAVE LED US TO SUCH HARDSHIPS! BUT WE ARE MOST GRATEFUL FOR YOUR HOSPITALITY, MY FRIEND.
MAY I PRESENT MY DAUGHTER... GABRIELA LAVINIA.
I AM CHARMED BY YOUR BEAUTY, MY DEAR. PLEASE... THINK OF THIS CASTLE AS YOUR HOME.
MANY THANKS, LORD DRACULA.
NOW, COME... THE HOUR GROWS LATE AND I'M SURE YOU ARE TIRED AND HUNGRY FROM THE LONG ROAD.
PLEASE, SETTLE INTO YOUR QUARTERS AND THEN JOIN ME IN THE DINING HALL.

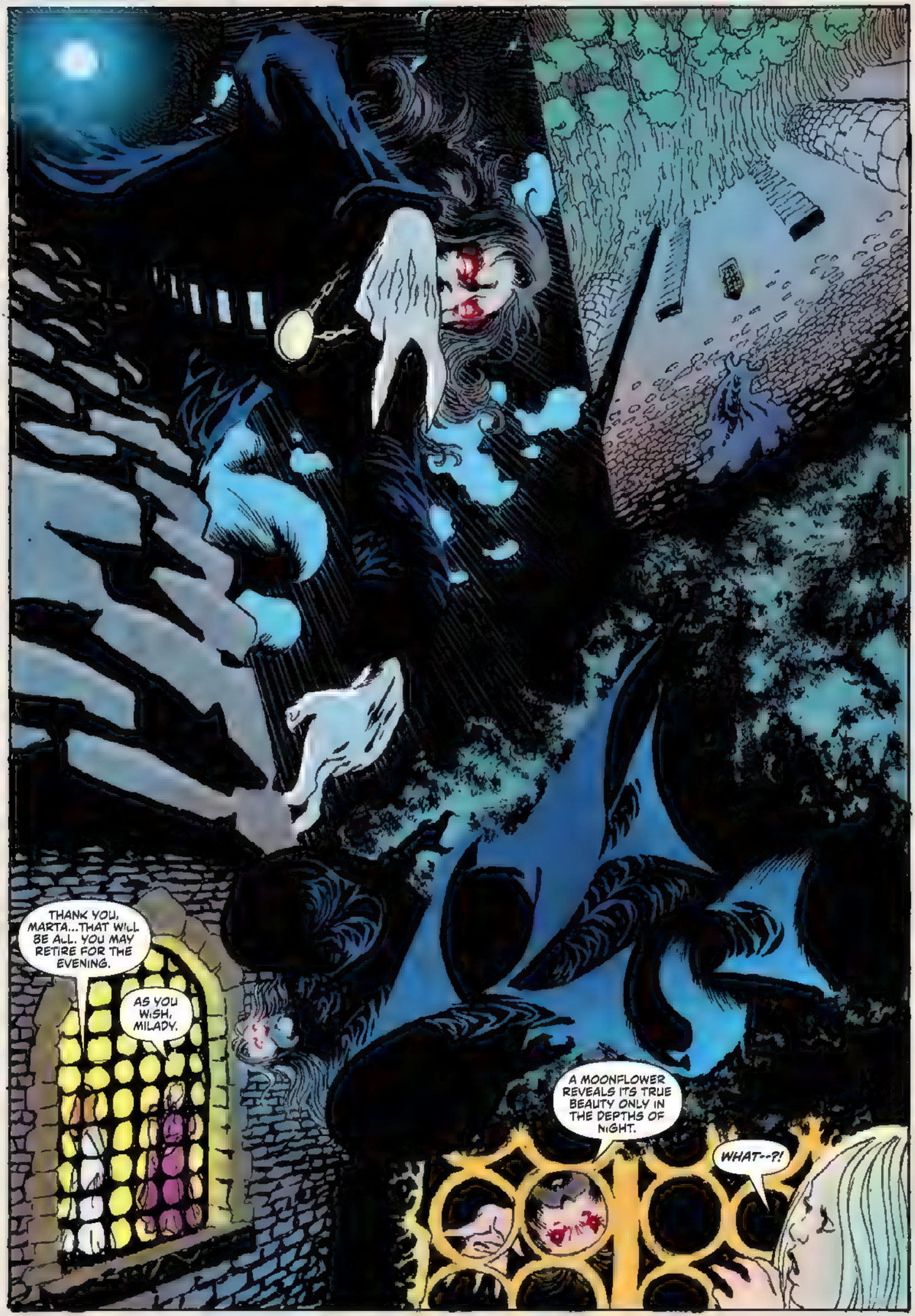

YOU WILL BOTH EXCUSE ME THAT I DO NOT JOIN YOU, BUT I HAVE ALREADY SUPPED.
SO LET ME RAISE A TOAST... TO YOUR SAFETY AND OUR MUTUAL GOOD FORTUNES.
TELL ME, FRIEND JANOS...HOW FARES THE OTTOMAN DOMINANCE OVER THE HUNGARIAN CROWN?
BAH! IT IS ALL BUT ABSOLUTE! THOSE COWARDS IN BUDAPEST TREMBLE AT THE MERE SIGHT OF A CRESCENT AND STAR BANNER!
THEY LACK ANY POWER AND AGENCY NOT GRANTED BY THEIR MASTERS IN ISTANBUL!
THEN THEY SHARE THE FATE OF ANY WIFE OR CONCUBINE.
WERE IT NOT FOR THE STONES BETWEEN THE LEGS, I'M SURE THE TURKS MIGHT EVEN TRY TO BREED OUR WESTERN OVERLORDS LIKE MARES ON A FARM.
NOW THAT WOULD BE QUITE A SIGHT!
IMPERTINENT GIRL! MUST I AGAIN ADMONISH YOU TO HOLD YOUR TONGUE IN THE COMPANY OF MEN?
WHO WOULD EVER TAKE SUCH A WILLFUL WENCH TO WIFE?
PEACE, GOOD JANOS. I ASSURE YOU... I TAKE NO OFFENSE.
I INITIALLY HAD NO DESIGNS ON JANOS'S DAUGHTER. HER FATHER'S PARTNERSHIP AND MILITARY RESOURCES WERE ALL THAT I DESIRED.

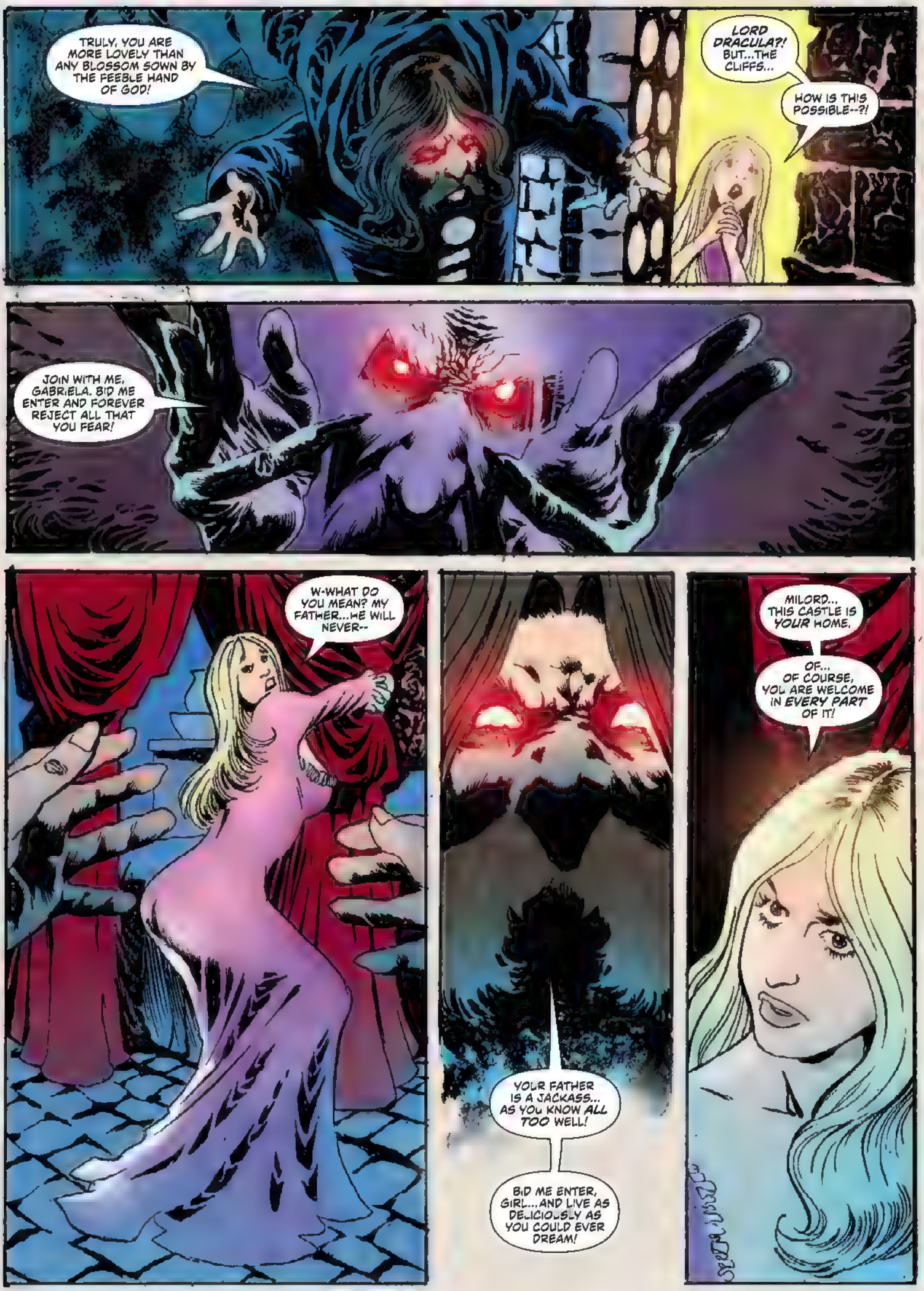

BUT HER QUICK WIT AND FORTHRIGHT MANNER SOON ATTRACTED MY ATTENTION... ALONG WITH HER MORE OBVIOUS CHARMS.
AND...SHE WAS LITERATE!
I TRUST YOU ARE FINDING MY ACCOMMODATIONS QUITE COMFORTABLE, HONORED MISS?
OH! LORD DRACULA... YOU STARTLED ME.
I AM SORRY TO INTRUDE, MILORD. IT'S JUST THAT...YOU SAID TO CONSIDER THE CASTLE OUR HOME.
AND, WELL... I AM FOND OF READING.
INDEED... YOU ARE MOST WELCOME.
AND I MUST SAY... YOUR LIBRARY IS QUITE IMPRESSIVE. AND IT HOUSES MANY UNUSUAL AND ARCANE VOLUMES.
I CONFESS I FIND THE SUBJECTS OF WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY QUITE FASCINATING!
YOU ARE NOT SHOCKED TO FIND SUCH BOOKS THAT THE CHURCH WOULD DEEM AS UNHOLY?
IN SOME AREAS, SUCH A COLLECTION MIGHT SEE ME EXCOMMUNICATED OR EVEN... CONDEMNED!

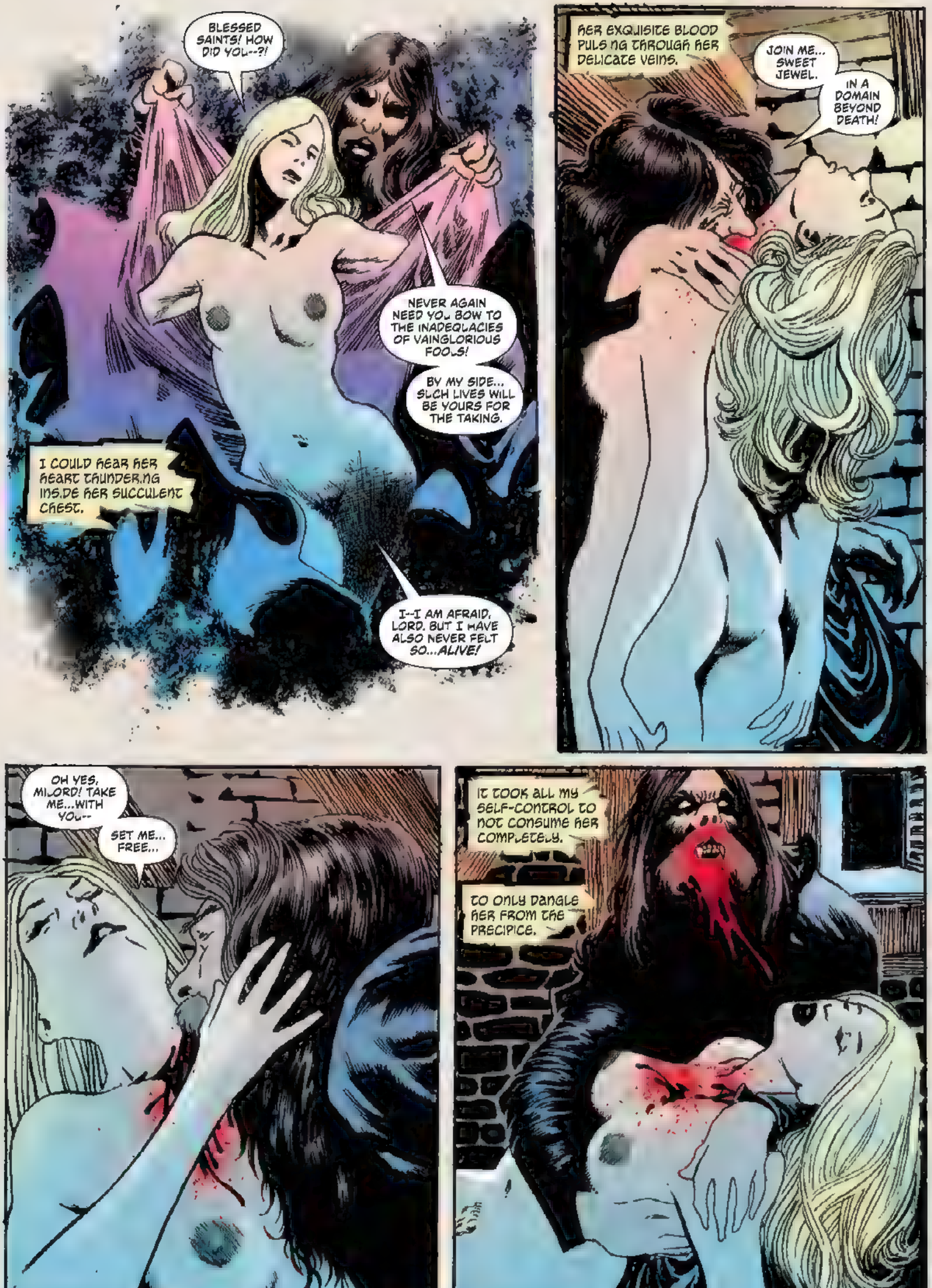

WELL, MY FATHER MIGHT FIND IT UNSEEMLY...BUT AS YOU MIGHT HAVE GATHERED, HE AND I DON'T SEE EYE TO EYE ON MANY SUBJECTS.
MY HAPPINESS, FOR INSTANCE.
I KNOW YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES SEEM UNCERTAIN RIGHT NOW. BUT YOU ARE OF NOBLE BIRTH... YOUR FELICITY IS ALL BUT ASSURED.
THE SAME BIRTHRIGHT THAT SAVES ME FROM A LIFETIME OF DRUDGERY AND TOIL ALSO CONDEMNS ME TO ONE OF SUBSERVIENCE AND BREEDING BENEATH A HUSBAND'S YOKE. AS A WOMAN, THAT IS MY CURSE.
AND MY FATHER CONSIDERS ME LITTLE MORE THAN A BARGAINING CHIP TO REGAIN HIS STATUS.
YOUR PARDON, MILORD...THIS IS MORE OF WHAT HE WOULD TERM MY "IMPERTINENCE."
AHHH...BUT YOU ARE STILL YOUNG...AND THIS WORLD HOLDS SURPRISES OF WHICH YOU HAVE NEVER YET DREAMED.
PERHAPS YOUR FATE IS NOT SO... CONSTRAINED AS YOU FEAR.
I WOULD CAUTION YOU TO LIMIT THE RANGE OF YOUR EXPLORATIONS THOUGH. THE CASTLE IS OLD AND SOME OF ITS RECESSES ARE DANGEROUS. IF YOU HAPPEN UPON ANY LOCKED DOORS...PLEASE CONSIDER THOSE AREAS OFF LIMITS.
AS YOU WISH, MILORD DRACULA.
GOOD EVENING.
AFTER ALL... IF THE HEATHEN MOHAMMEDANS CAN EMBRACE MORE THAN ONE BRIDE, WHY NOT THE SON OF THE DRAGON?

as it turned out, janos corvinus was little more than a blowhard. and his usefulness to me soon seemed questionable.
as you can see, janos...here we are all but immune to outright attack.
how many more troops do you think you can muster?
my own armed forces were southern mercenaries, hired with the treasure i had buried and hidden when i first fled wallachia.
insufficient strength for any serious rebellion.
once word spreads of how shamefully the crown has treated me, there will be a *tidal wave* of support for my cause!
you will see... *all* the other voivodes will revolt in the name of unity! surely, it *must* be so!
but there was one asset of his that i now found even more desirable.
somehow, i doubt that.
but there is another way, my friend... to truly unite forces and seal the bonds of our alliance.
your daughter is unwed... as am i.
the joining of our two houses would send a fierce message to the other warlords... *and* the crown!

BUT...THE FOOL WAS TOO STUBBORN TO CONCEDE TO MY WILL.
IT WOULD BE A STRONG PAIRING. SHE IS IN THE PRIME OF HER WOMANHOOD... AND WOULD MAKE A SPLENDID BRIDE!
ARE YOU MAD, DRACULA?! WE ARE *ALREADY* JOINED! BY OUR COMMON PURPOSE!
I MUST SAVE GABRIELA'S MAIDENHEAD TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE CROWN AND SECURE MY RANK!
THE KING HAS A SON THAT IS STILL UNWED... AND NEARLY HER AGE!
THERE WILL BE NO MARRIAGE WITH ANYTHING LESS THAN A *ROYAL* LINEAGE!
ONLY *THEN* CAN I LAY CLAIM TO WHAT IS *RIGHTFULLY MINE!!*
AND SO I WAS LEFT NO OPTION BUT TO FORCEFULLY TAKE WHAT I WANTED.
AS I HAD PLANNED TO DO ALL ALONG.


THANK YOU, MARTA...THAT WILL BE ALL. YOU MAY RETIRE FOR THE EVENING.
AS YOU WISH, MILADY.
A MOONFLOWER REVEALS ITS TRUE BEAUTY ONLY IN THE DEPTHS OF NIGHT.
WHAT--?!


TRULY, YOU ARE MORE LOVELY THAN ANY BLOSSOM SOWN BY THE FEEBLE HAND OF GOD!
LORD DRACULA?! BUT...THE CLIFFS...
HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE--?!
JOIN WITH ME, GABRIELA. BID ME ENTER AND FOREVER REJECT ALL THAT YOU FEAR!
W-WHAT DO YOU MEAN? MY FATHER...HE WILL NEVER--
YOUR FATHER IS A JACKASS... AS YOU KNOW ALL TOO WELL!
BID ME ENTER, GIRL...AND LIVE AS DELICIOUSLY AS YOU COULD EVER DREAM!
MILORD... THIS CASTLE IS YOUR HOME.
OF... OF COURSE, YOU ARE WELCOME IN EVERY PART OF IT!


BLESSED SAINTS! HOW DID YOU--?!
NEVER AGAIN NEED YOU BOW TO THE INADEQUACIES OF VAINGLORIOUS FOOLS!
BY MY SIDE... SUCH LIVES WILL BE YOURS FOR THE TAKING.
I COULD HEAR HER HEART THUNDERING INSIDE HER SUCCULENT CHEST.
I--I AM AFRAID, LORD. BUT I HAVE ALSO NEVER FELT SO...ALIVE!
HER EXQUISITE BLOOD PULSING THROUGH HER DELICATE VEINS.
JOIN ME... SWEET JEWEL.
IN A DOMAIN BEYOND DEATH!
OH YES, MILORD! TAKE ME...WITH YOU--
SET ME... FREE...
IT TOOK ALL MY SELF-CONTROL TO NOT CONSUME HER COMPLETELY.
TO ONLY DANGLE HER FROM THE PRECIPICE.

FOR NOW...IT WAS HER TURN TO DRINK OF MY SAP.
SUCK DEEP, MY PRIZE...YOUR FIRST TASTE OF AN AMBROSIA BEYOND THE REALM OF IMAGINATION!
THE COLD FIRE SPARKED IN HER EYES.
AND SHE AWAKENED FROM THE TRANCE OF DEATH TO A VORACIOUS VIBRANCY FORGED IN THE RIVERS OF HELL.
THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE!

DRACULA, YOU SON OF A BITCH! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY DAUGHTER?
EXACTLY AS I PLEASED. AND NOTHING SHE DIDN'T WANT ME TO DO, I ASSURE YOU.
YOU FUCKING MONSTER! WITH YOUR FETID BREATH AND FISH-COLD FLESH--
SHE WAS MY PRIDE AND TREASURE! AND NOW, SHE'S...CHANGED SOMEHOW! DESPOILED!!
SHE HASN'T COME OUT OF HER QUARTERS FOR DAYS! AND WHEN I FINALLY FORCED MY WAY INSIDE, SHE LOOKED SO... SO WANTON AND WILD!
WHEN I TRIED TO COMFORT HER, SHE...SHE HISSED AT ME! LIKE SOME KIND OF ANIMAL!
WHAT'S THE MATTER, FATHER? YOU SOUND SO DISGRUNTLED.

GABRIELA! WHAT--?
BUT, THEN AGAIN...YOU ALWAYS DO. IS IT ME?
AM I NO LONGER THAT PERFECT DAMSEL THAT YOU'D HOPED TO TRADE OFF FOR POLITICAL GAIN?
YOU SOUGHT TO SELL ME LIKE A PRIZE HORSE... YOU DISGUSTING BEAST!
WELL, I'M BEYOND ALL THAT NOW, "PAPA."
NO! WHAT... WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU?! MY DARLING GIR--
FINALLY... I AM BEYOND YOU!
AGGHH!

N-NO!
NOOOO!
YOU SEE, FATHER? HOW IT FEELS TO BE POWERLESS...AND AFRAID?!
LIKE MY MOTHER SURELY DID!
SKRCH
LIKE ANY WOMAN DOES!
HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!
HER JOY AT THIS FIRST FEEDING WAS SO UNBRIDLED... SO DELIRIOUS.
THIS TIME... I HAD MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE.

and thus...
I attained my second bride.
mine to embrace.
mine to maintain.
mine to do with...
as I pleased.

I summoned Luca, son of Fenix, to deal with the remains.
Like his father before him... Luca knew his place.

I then issued an edict to explain Janos's demise.
By my order-- *Vlad Dracula*, voivode of these Transylvanian highlands-- Janos Corvinus has been condemned for the crimes of high treason and sedition.
Let all witness his corpse and take heed of the fate that awaits *every* traitor!

In short order, Janos's remaining retinue beat a hasty retreat.

and I was forced to reconcile the fact that I might never reattain the earthly power that I desired.
that I surely *deserved*.

YET EVEN AS DOMINION IN THIS SPHERE CONTINUED TO ELUDE ME...
THERE WAS ANOTHER FAR MORE SHADOWY REALM OVER WHICH I HELD SOVEREIGNTY.
AAOOS
ALONGSIDE THE CREATURES OF THE NIGHT THAT WERE ALREADY IN MY THRALL...
THERE LURKS A SOCIETY OF PHANTASMS AND FIENDS.

THE DARK DENIZENS OF THE WAKING WORLD'S NIGHTMARES.

OPRIȚI... ȘI DEPUNEȚI!
BUN.
Go, wild child... rejoin the pack and relish your ferocity.
IF THE THRONES OF MAN WERE NOT TO BE MINE...
I WAS STILL AN UNDISPUTED PRINCE OF DARKNESS.

and it is a vast domain.

the nether regions are a sprawling abyss of which the living denizens of this world remain blissfully ignorant, lest their very sanity be rent asunder.
for there are worlds within worlds within worlds.
all the shadows that flit around the fringes of the perceptions of the living...

...are laid bare and evident to my vampiric gaze.

Castle Dracula alone is home to literally dozens of specters.
The forlorn and forgotten dead whose restless spirits cannot relinquish their grasp on this sordid life.
When I was young, I often thought I'd caught a glimpse of such ghosts.

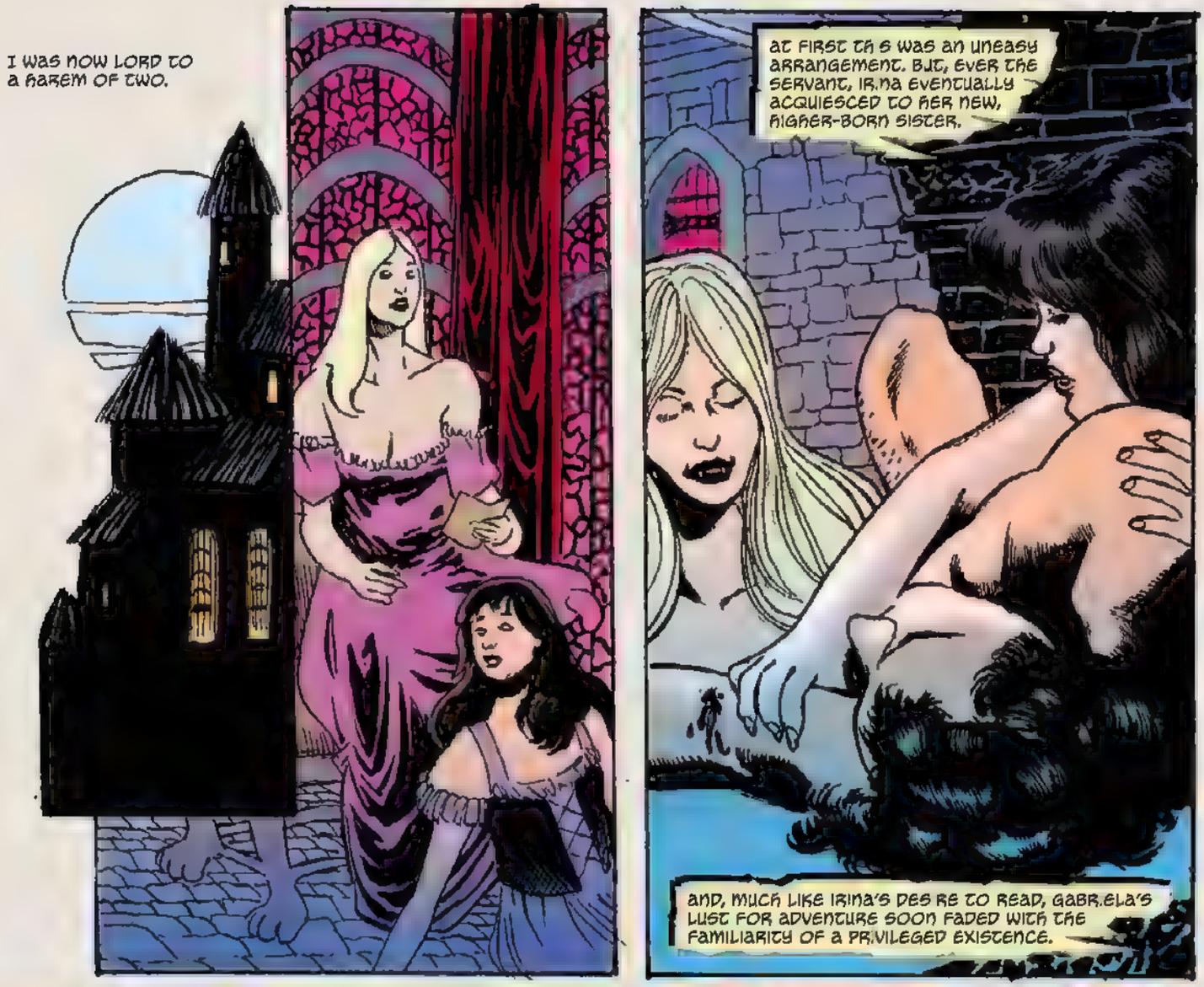
But now I see them all with amazing clarity. Even as I can see through the most stygian darkness.

Certain people are immune to their ethereal essence and mournful lamentations.

While others feel their chilling presence like the current of an icy river.

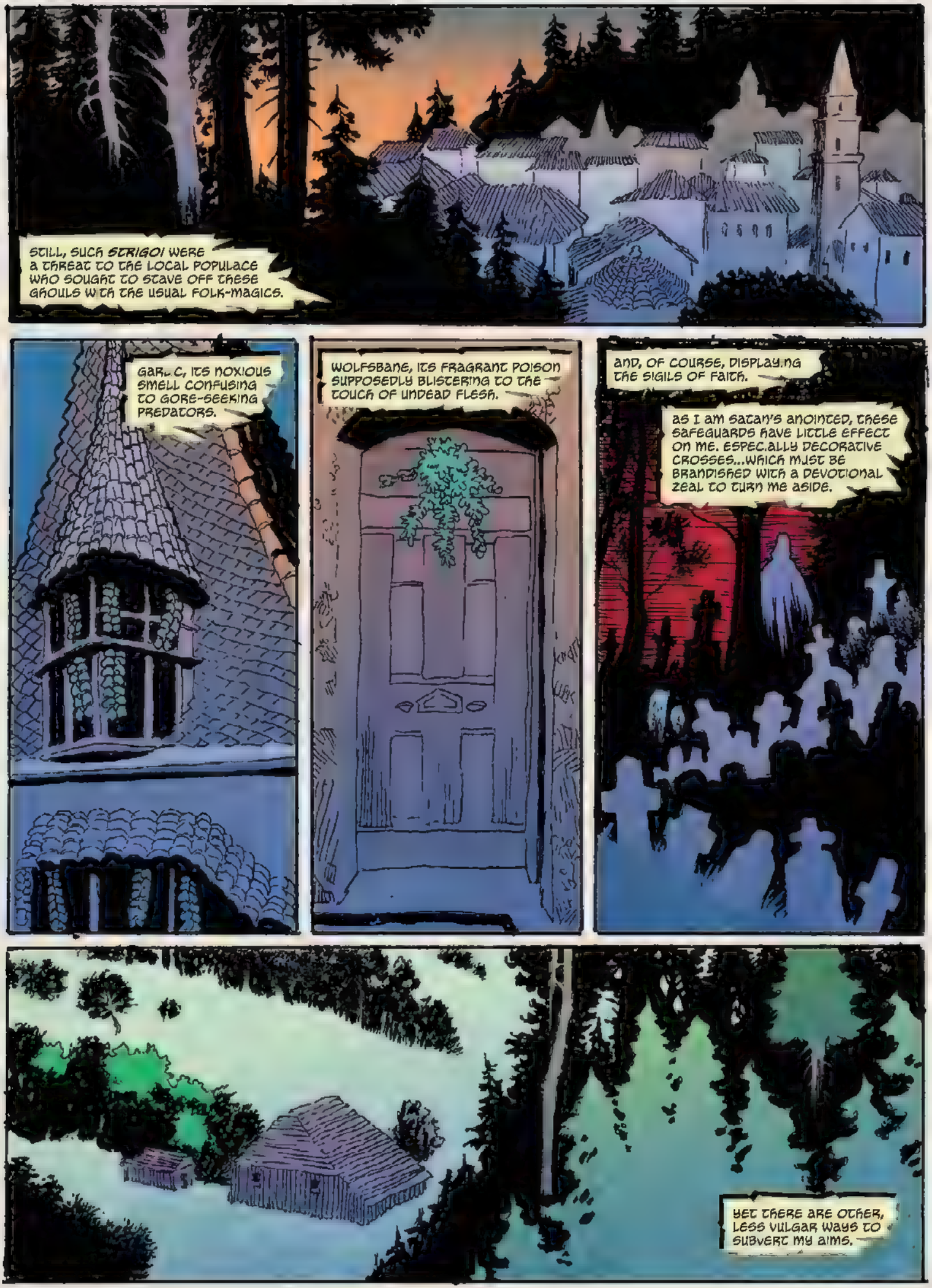
But I am privy to all of their haunted ramblings.
Some have lingered so long that they've even forgotten why they are still bound to this world.
Like the faded embers of a fire long past smoldering.
ESTI TERMINAT. ÎNCEPE.
When it pleases me... I sometimes send these dissipated wraiths to their final oblivion.
But not all spirits are so... lifeless.

His misch evous laughter echoes like broken glass off the cold stone walls.

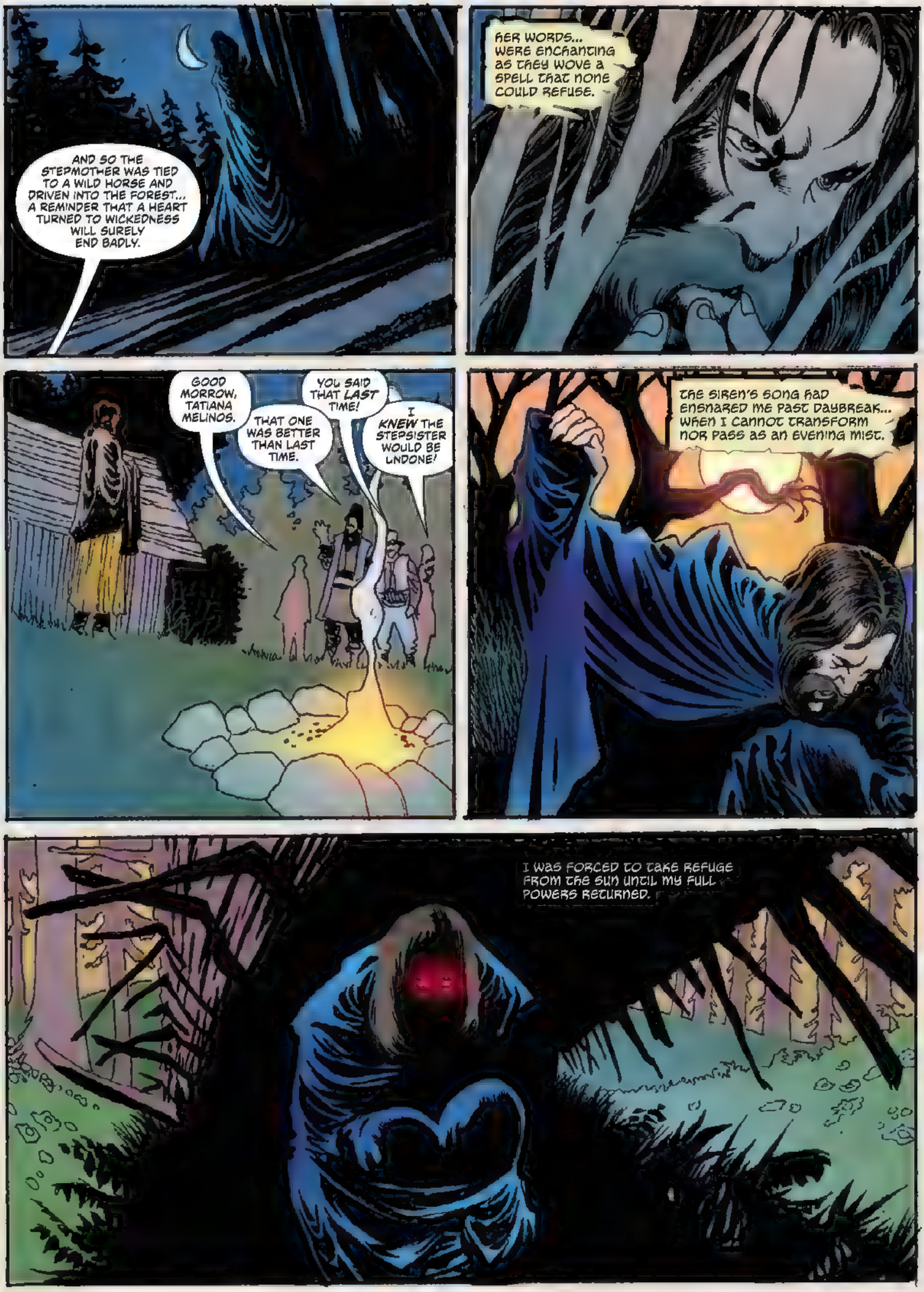

I was now lord to a harem of two.
At first this was an uneasy arrangement. But, ever the servant, Irina eventually acquiesced to her new, higher-born sister.
And, much like Irina's desire to read, Gabriela's lust for adventure soon faded with the familiarity of a privileged existence.

Irina deferred to Gabriela in all regards...even affording her the lioness's share of any feeding.
They took comfort in each other's company and so it was no trouble to limit their movements to a tower seraglio.
But I soon grew bored with their companionship... and spent more and more time prowling the forests of my realm.

IN MY OWN KINDRED...THE BLOODSUCKERS AND GHOULS WHO HAD HAUNTED THESE LANDS FOR MILLENNIA...I HAD LITTLE INTEREST.
SCANT ON COGNIZANCE, THEY WERE CREATURES OF WANTON HUNGER AND NO DESIGN.
STILL, THEY SEEMED DRAWN TO MY POWER AND OCCASIONALLY WOUND THEIR WAY TOWARD MY DOMINATING PRESENCE.
INEVITABLY, I WAS LEFT WITH NO RECOURSE BUT TO CAST THEM BACK TO WHERE THEY CAME FROM.
THEY WERE OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE... AND NO MORE MY CLASS OF VAMPIRE THAN A WORM IS THAT OF A COBRA.


STILL, SUCH STRIGOI WERE A THREAT TO THE LOCAL POPULACE WHO SOUGHT TO STAVE OFF THESE GHOULS WITH THE USUAL FOLK-MAGICS.
GARLIC, ITS NOXIOUS SMELL CONFUSING TO GORE-SEEKING PREDATORS.
WOLFSBANE, ITS FRAGRANT POISON SUPPOSEDLY BLISTERING TO THE TOUCH OF UNDEAD FLESH.
AND, OF COURSE, DISPLAYING THE SIGILS OF FAITH.
AS I AM SATAN'S ANOINTED, THESE SAFEGUARDS HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON ME. ESPECIALLY DECORATIVE CROSSES...WHICH MUST BE BRANDISHED WITH A DEVOTIONAL ZEAL TO TURN ME ASIDE.
YET THERE ARE OTHER, LESS VULGAR WAYS TO SUBVERT MY AIMS.

On the outskirts of Tiahta at this time lived a woman known as Catiana.
although the villagers were suspicious of such a beautiful girl who was yet unwed, they still referred to her as Melinos--"the merciful."
a condition which I have never suffered.
She was known as a medicine woman but also... as a teller of tales, a skill with which she regaled her neighbors every fortnight... often late into the evening.
Once upon a time, what happened did happen; and if it hadn't happened... I'd never have heard this tale that I'm about to tell you.
and the next morning...two baby boys with golden hair and stars on their foreheads were born to the princess Letitza!
"Never mind," said the Emperor, whose anger had dropped before the silvery tone of the boys' voices. "Let them sing!"
Intrigued by her reputation, one evening...I joined her audience.


AND SO THE STEPMOTHER WAS TIED TO A WILD HORSE AND DRIVEN INTO THE FOREST... A REMINDER THAT A HEART TURNED TO WICKEDNESS WILL SURELY END BADLY.
HER WORDS... WERE ENCHANTING AS THEY WOVE A SPELL THAT NONE COULD REFUSE.
GOOD MORROW, TATIANA MELINOS.
THAT ONE WAS BETTER THAN LAST TIME.
YOU SAID THAT LAST TIME!
I KNEW THE STEPSISTER WOULD BE UNDONE!
THE SIREN'S SONG HAD ENSNARED ME PAST DAYBREAK... WHEN I CANNOT TRANSFORM NOR PASS AS AN EVENING MIST.
I WAS FORCED TO TAKE REFUGE FROM THE SUN UNTIL MY FULL POWERS RETURNED.

I have never tolerated being so inconvenienced... and yet I could not purge the memory of her voice. the tenor of her tale.
I returned to observe her again and again... even through the weakening daylight hours.
and despite her merciful ways...I felt drawn to this humble yet dignified woman. so unlike any other I'd ever known.
and, for the first time in nearly a century...
OH FOX, YOU'VE STOLEN MY GOOSE...
GIVE IT BACK TO ME! GIVE IT BACK TO ME!
ROAST GOOSE PIE IS NOT FOR YOU...
GIVE IT BACK TO ME! GIVE IT BACK TO ME!
I began to contemplate... taking another bride.

and, as in all things... I was determined to have that which I desired.
HONORED MADAM...
YOU ARE AS HANDSOME AND GRACIOUS AS ANY QUEEN. I WOULD HAVE YOU FOR MY WIFE...AND OFFER YOU CIRCUMSTANCES FAR ABOVE THIS HUMBLE ABODE.
THIS CABIN IS ALL THE SPLENDOR I COULD EVER WANT, GOOD STRANGER.
AND WHY SHOULD I ACCEPT THE ADVANCES OF A MAN WHO LURKS AROUND MY HOUSE LIKE A HUNGRY DOG? YES...I HAVE SEEN YOU BEFORE.
THEN YOU UNDERSTAND THE MEASURE OF MY ARDOR.
COME... JOIN WITH ME AND KNOW LIFE AS YOU HAVE NEVER PERCEIVED IT!
THE LIFE I HAVE CHOSEN SUITS MY EVERY NEED...INDENTURED TO NO ONE.
I BID YOU FAREWELL, STRANGER...AND ASK THAT YOU TROUBLE ME NO MORE.
SLAM
ONE BIT OF MAGIC THAT DOES RESTRAIN ANY OF SATAN'S SPAWN...I CANNOT ENTER A DWELLING UNINVITED.

I returned the following evening, when my powers are at their fullest...yet still found no admittance.
Fair Tatiana... why do you deny my proposal? Are the depths of my desire for you not evident?
If you are as I believe, then your intentions are not to be trusted. You cast no shadow by the rays of the setting sun and I know you cannot enter this house unless I say so.
Why then have you set your devilish aims on me? What makes you want me so badly?
I am accustomed to having that which I desire. I am bewitched by your beauty and your dignity.
And the tales you tell sparkle with such vivid enchantment...
Is it a story you desire? Why... I would gladly share such with you!
Once there was a king who had three daughters...

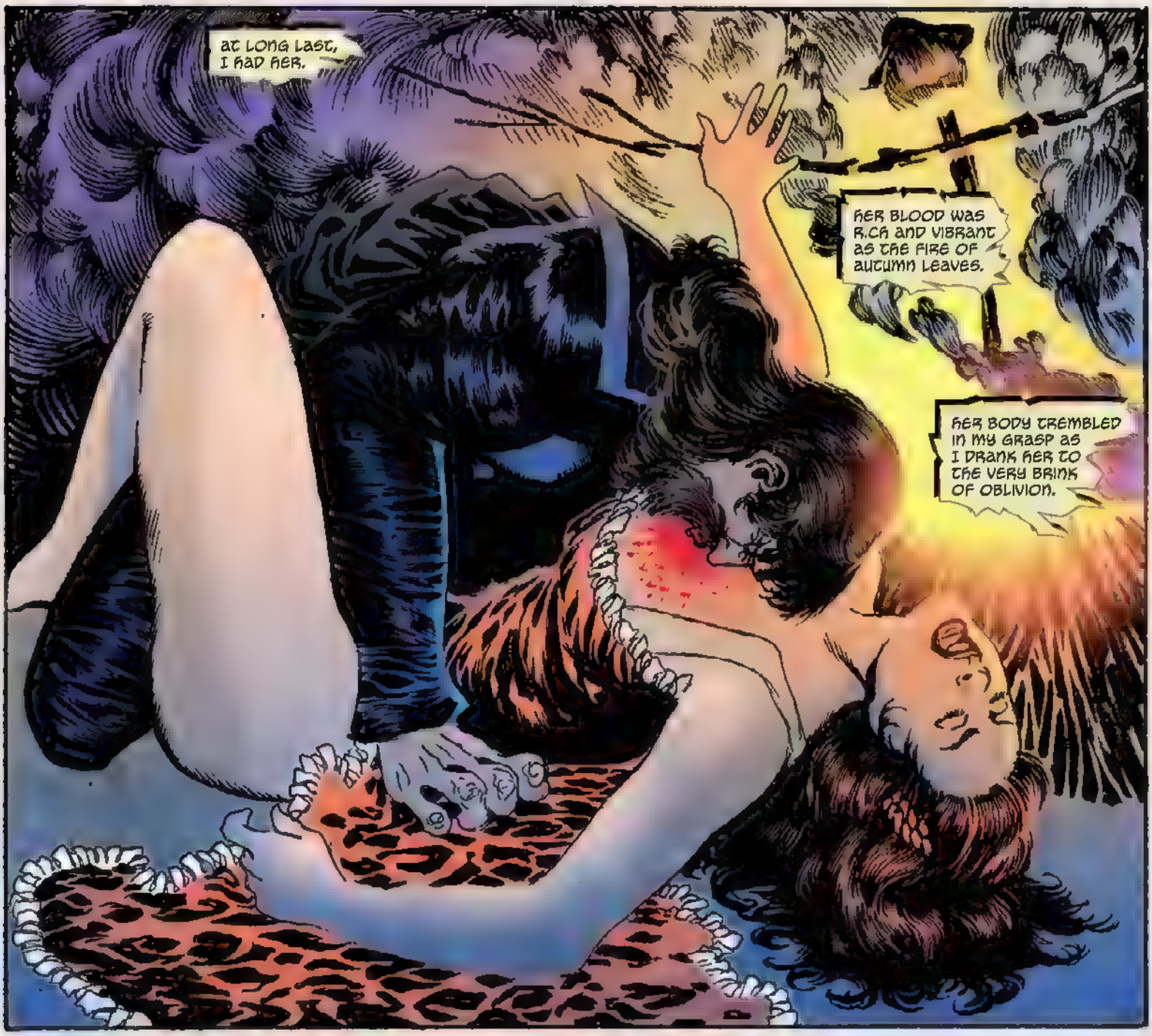
NOW ONE DAY, AN ENORMOUS PIG FROM THE NORTH WALKED INTO THE PALACE. THIS WAS NO ORDINARY SWINE...
THE MOTHER OF THE MOON, WHEN SHE SAW HER SAD PLIGHT, FELT A GREAT PITY FOR THE PRINCESS.
AGAIN, HER WORDS CAPTIVATED ME.
AND I WAS LOST IN THE SPELL OF HER NARRATIVES.
A SCENE THAT REPEATED ITSELF NIGHT AFTER NIGHT. YET STILL SHE REFUSED ME ENTRY.
AND EVERY MORNING, I WAS FORCED AGA N TO WITHDRAW.

ONE NIGHT...
FAIR TATIANA... ALLOW ME THE HONOR OF RETURNING YOUR HOSPITALITY.
MIGHT I TELL YOU A STORY?
A STORY TOLD IS ALWAYS A BLESSING ON THE WORLD!
WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, MY FATHERED OFFERED MY BROTHER AND MYSELF IN A HOSTAGE EXCHANGE WITH HIS HATED ENEMIES... THE OTTOMAN TURKS.
I WAS RIPPED AWAY FROM EVERYTHING I KNEW AND LOVED...AND SENT TO LIVE UNDER THE SULTAN'S MERCILESS HOSPITALITY.
EVERY MORNING, WE WERE EACH FORCED TO CHOOSE ONE SLAVE WHO WOULD BE KILLED IN OUR PLACE.
AND EVERY INFRACTION OF THEIR ISLAMIC LAW--OF WHICH WE KNEW LITTLE--WAS PUNISHABLE BY HOLDING US UNDERWATER UNTIL WE NEARLY DROWNED.
FOR FIVE YEARS, I ENDURED SUCH ABUSE...AND I LEARNED THE TRUE MEANING OF TERROR.
Ohhhh... YOU POOR, POOR CHILD! THIS IS...ONE OF THE SADDEST TALES I'VE EVER HEARD!
PLEASE... MY BELOVED, LET ME IN. I SWEAR I MEAN YOU NO HARM! I ONLY--
NO! I CANNOT TRUST ONE SUCH AS YOU. I BEG YOU...LEAVE ME ALONE!
FINALLY...I WAS LEFT WITH NO OPTION BUT TO PREY UPON HER MERCY.

NIGHT FALLS AND I AM ALONE. COULD IT BE THAT MY SPECTRAL SUITOR HAS FINALLY--
AIIEE
EEE!
WHAT?!
BLESSED SAINTS! IT...IT IS A CHILD!
"BEING BURNED ALIVE!!"
AAIIEEEE
WHO COULD'VE DONE SUCH A THING?! SURELY, HE WOULDN'T--
WAIT... IT'S NOT--

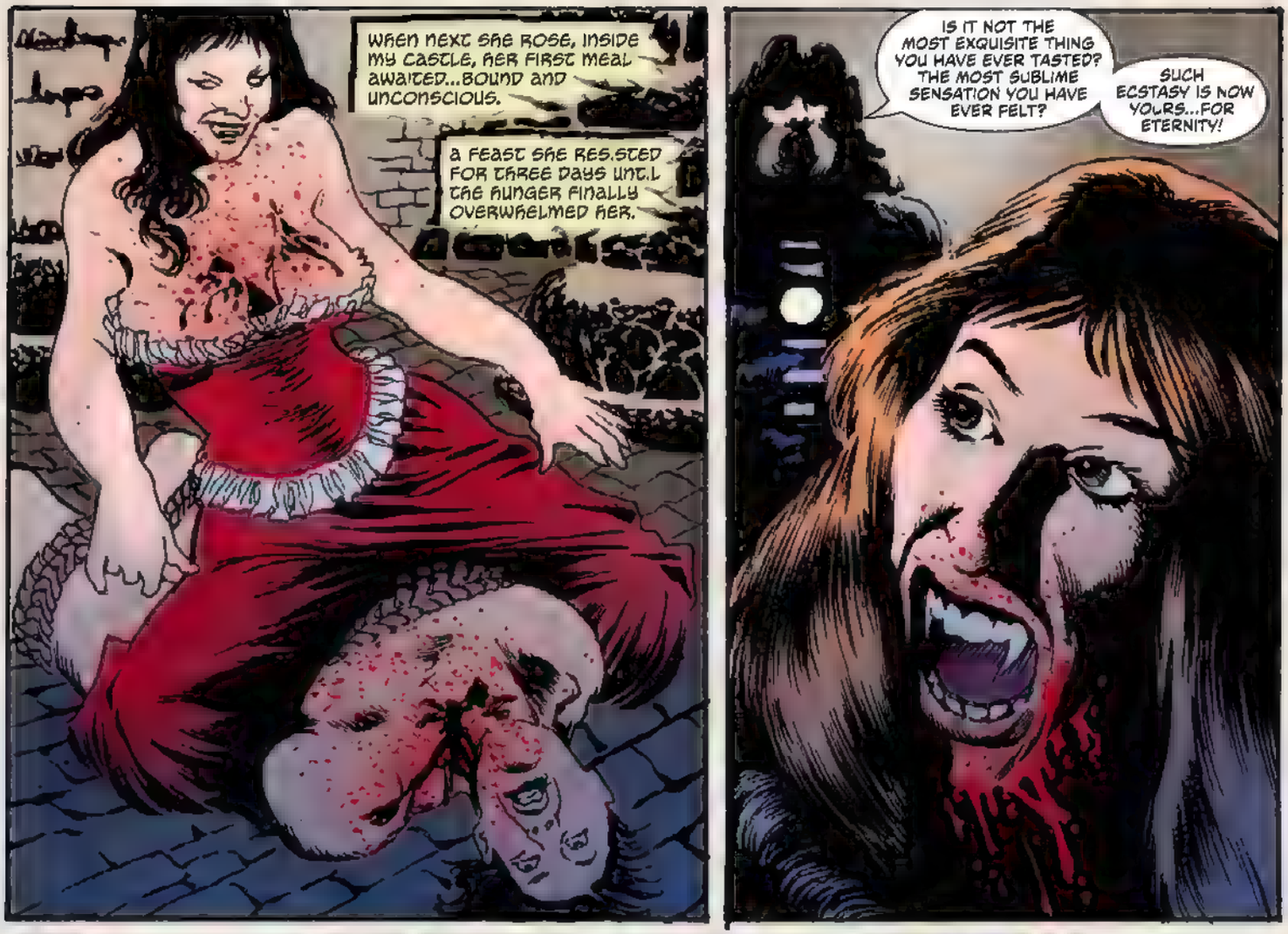
IT'S... IT'S NOT REAL. JUST...AN EFFIGY.
IT WAS ONLY...THE BATS SCREECHING.
FAIR TATIANA... I'VE TOLD YOU OFTEN-- I'M ACCUSTOMED TO HAVING ALL THAT I DESIRE. COME NOW... LET ME SHARE WITH YOU AN EXISTENCE BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS.
NO! PLEASE... LET ME GO! I-I DON'T WANT THIS--
I SAID... NO!
AGGGH!
BLASPHEMY!
HOW WAS THIS POSSIBLE? SHE WAS NOT OF THE CHURCH... A WIELDER OF EARTH MAGICKS!
THE CROSS SHOULD HAVE MEANT NOTHING TO HER!

HOW...HOW CAN YOU DO THIS TO ME, TATIANA? THAT WRETCHED TOKEN BURNS LIKE HELLFIRE IN MY VERY VEINS!
LIKE A FESTERING CANCER IN MY BRAIN!
AND THEN I REALIZED... HERS WAS A FAITH THAT EMBRACED ALL DOGMAS.
OH, SWEET MERCY BETRAYS ME. I...I CANNOT BE THE CAUSE OF SUCH AGONY...
IT WAS THE LOVE OF LIFE ITSELF.
EVEN TO ONE SUCH AS YOU!
AND BY SUCH PITY... I AM DOOMED.
HUSH, MY BEAUTY...AND BE AT PEACE.
YOU WILL FIND ME NOT SO VERY CRUEL.


at long last, I had her.
her blood was rich and vibrant as the fire of autumn leaves.
her body trembled in my grasp as I drank her to the very brink of oblivion.

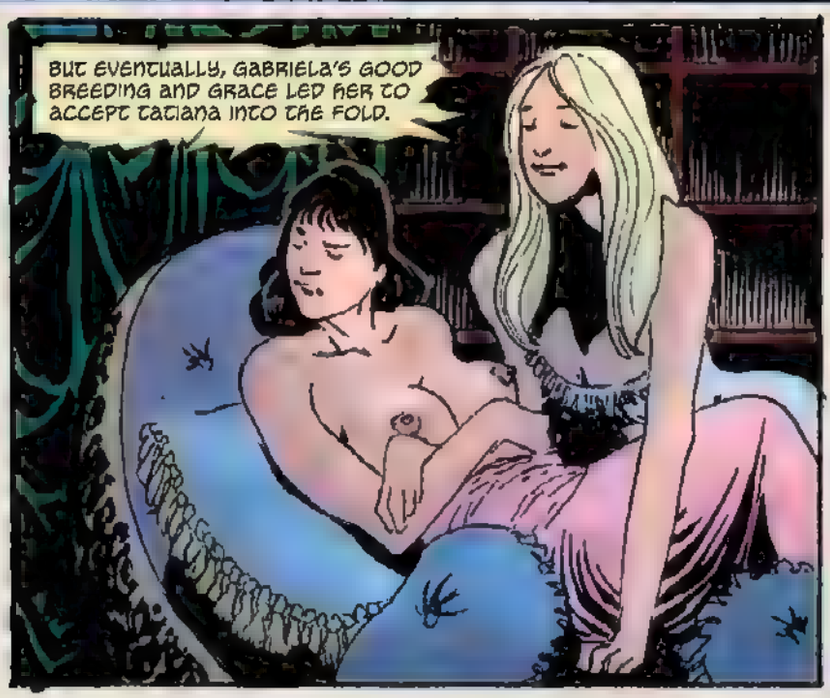
no... don't you understand? y-you are the cruelest one of all.

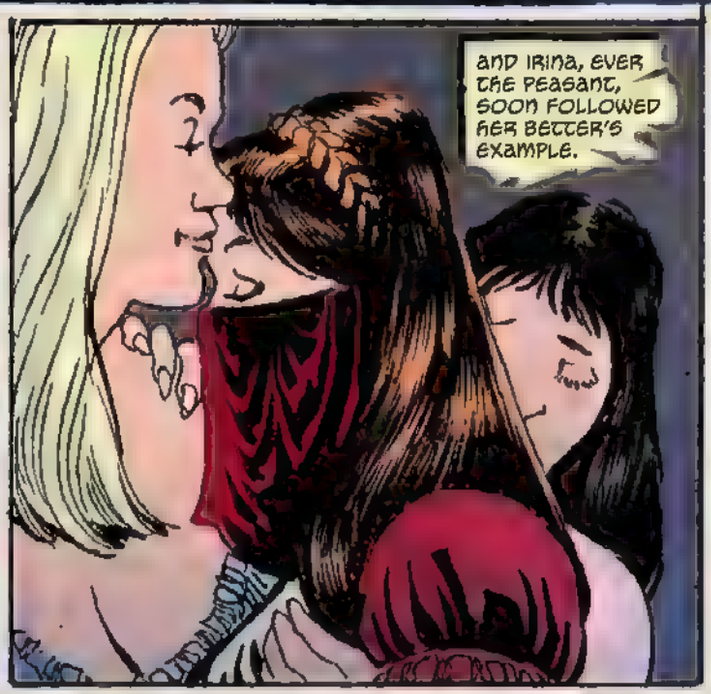
and so I consummated this coupling with my third bride.
mine to embrace. mine to enjoy.
mine to do with... as I pleased.
her place at my side assured, I endeavored to make her transition into undeath as smooth as possible.

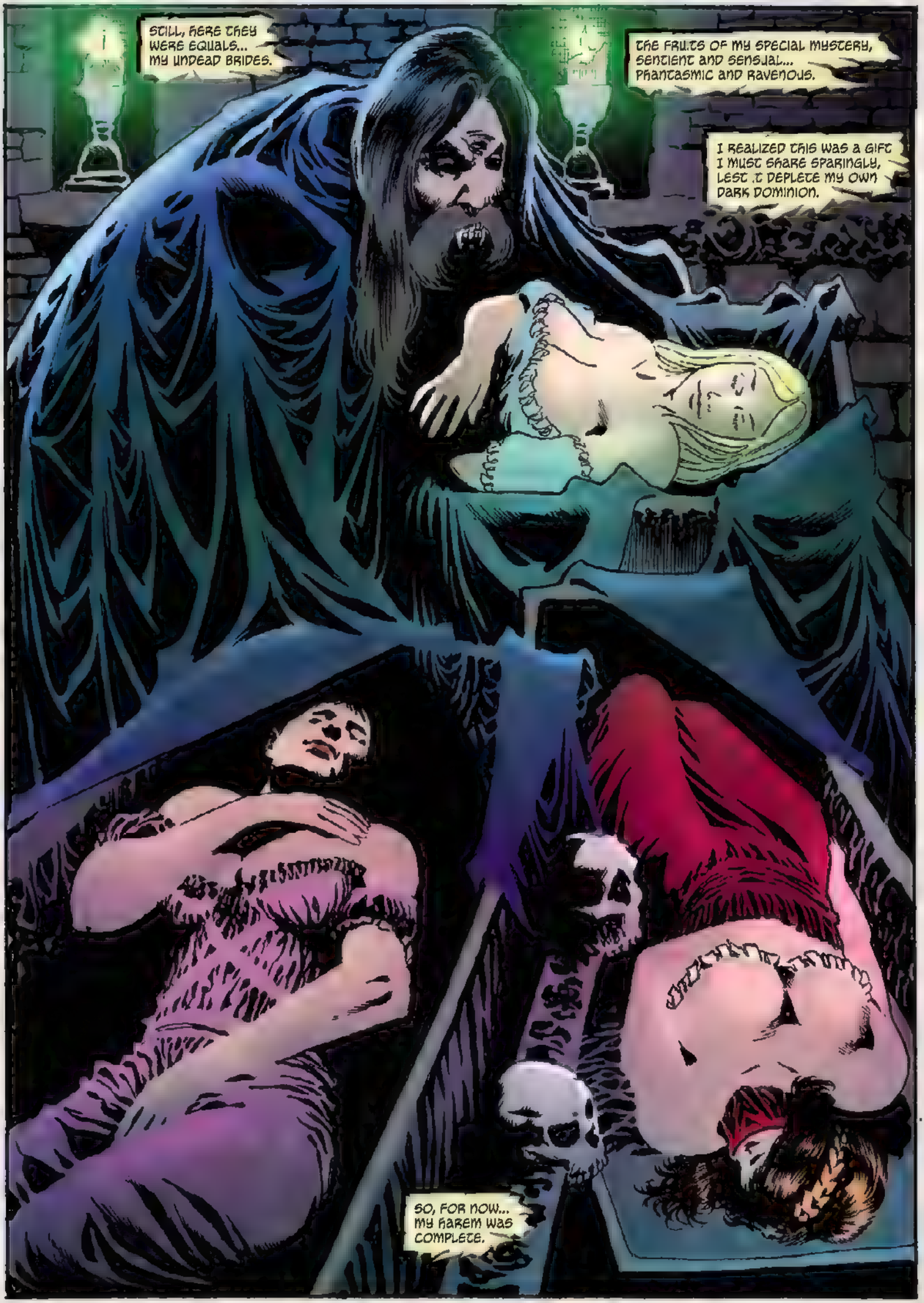

When next she rose, inside my castle, her first meal awaited...bound and unconscious.
A feast she rested for three days until the hunger finally overwhelmed her.
Is it not the most exquisite thing you have ever tasted? The most sublime sensation you have ever felt?
Such ecstasy is now yours...for eternity!

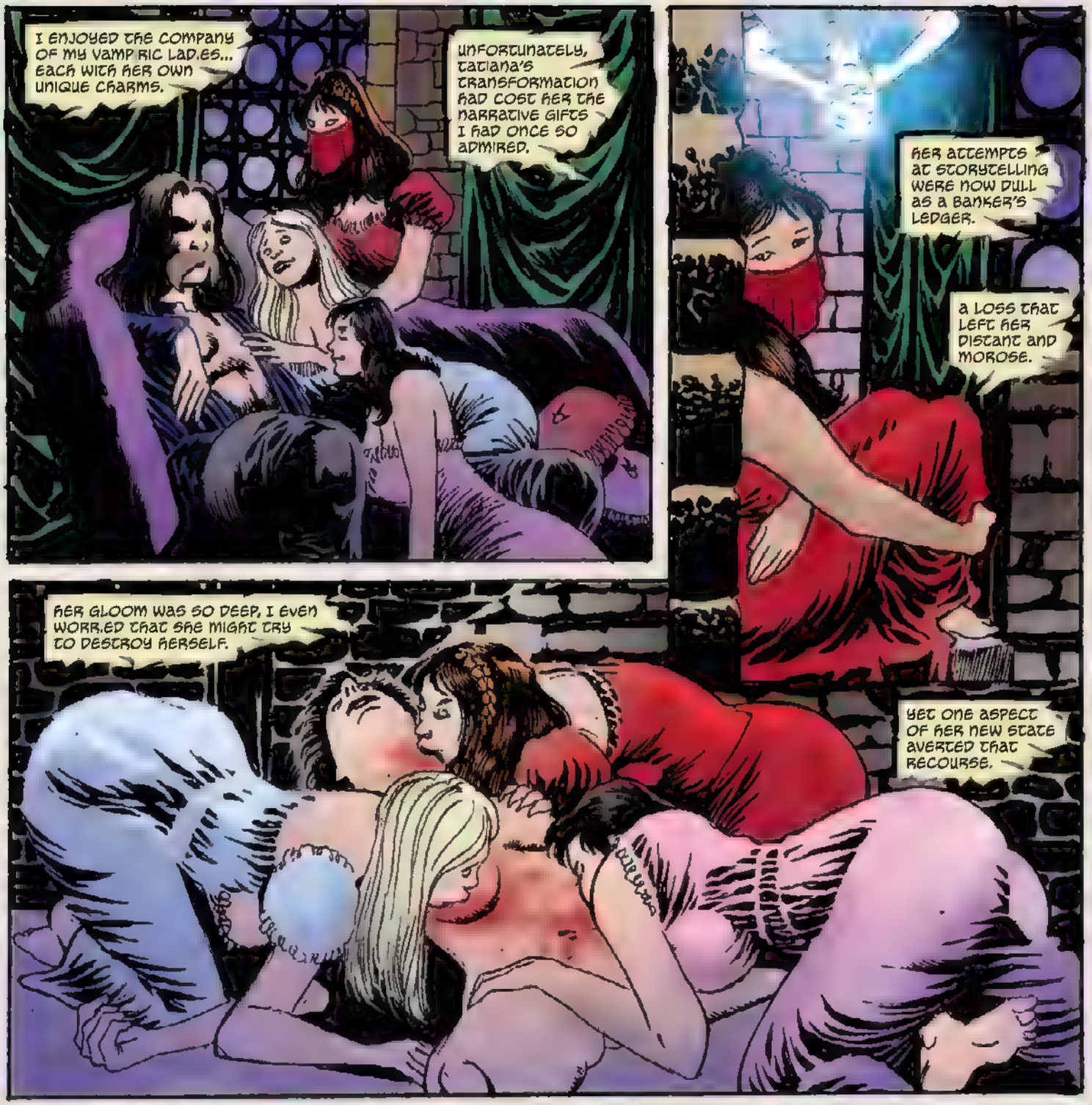
What...what have you DONE to me?! What is this vile craving that overwhelms me?
Why do I shun the blessed dawn to slumber in a CASKET?!
It is as I promised... you have entered a world beyond imagining, one in which you will never grow sick or old or die. I have SAVED you from the reaper's embrace!
I...I never asked for such rescue.
As a nobleman, it is my right to dispense such largesse as I see fit.
And, besides...now your enchanting stories will live FOREVER!

AFTER A PERIOD OF ADJUSTMENT, I INTRODUCED HER TO THE REST OF MY HOUSEHOLD.
THE OTHER BRIDES HAD GROWN USED TO THEIR PRIVILEGED STATUS AND WERE, AT FIRST, DISMAYED TO LEARN OF THIS NEW ADDITION TO THE R RANKS.


BUT EVENTUALLY, GABRIELA'S GOOD BREEDING AND GRACE LED HER TO ACCEPT TATIANA INTO THE FOLD.

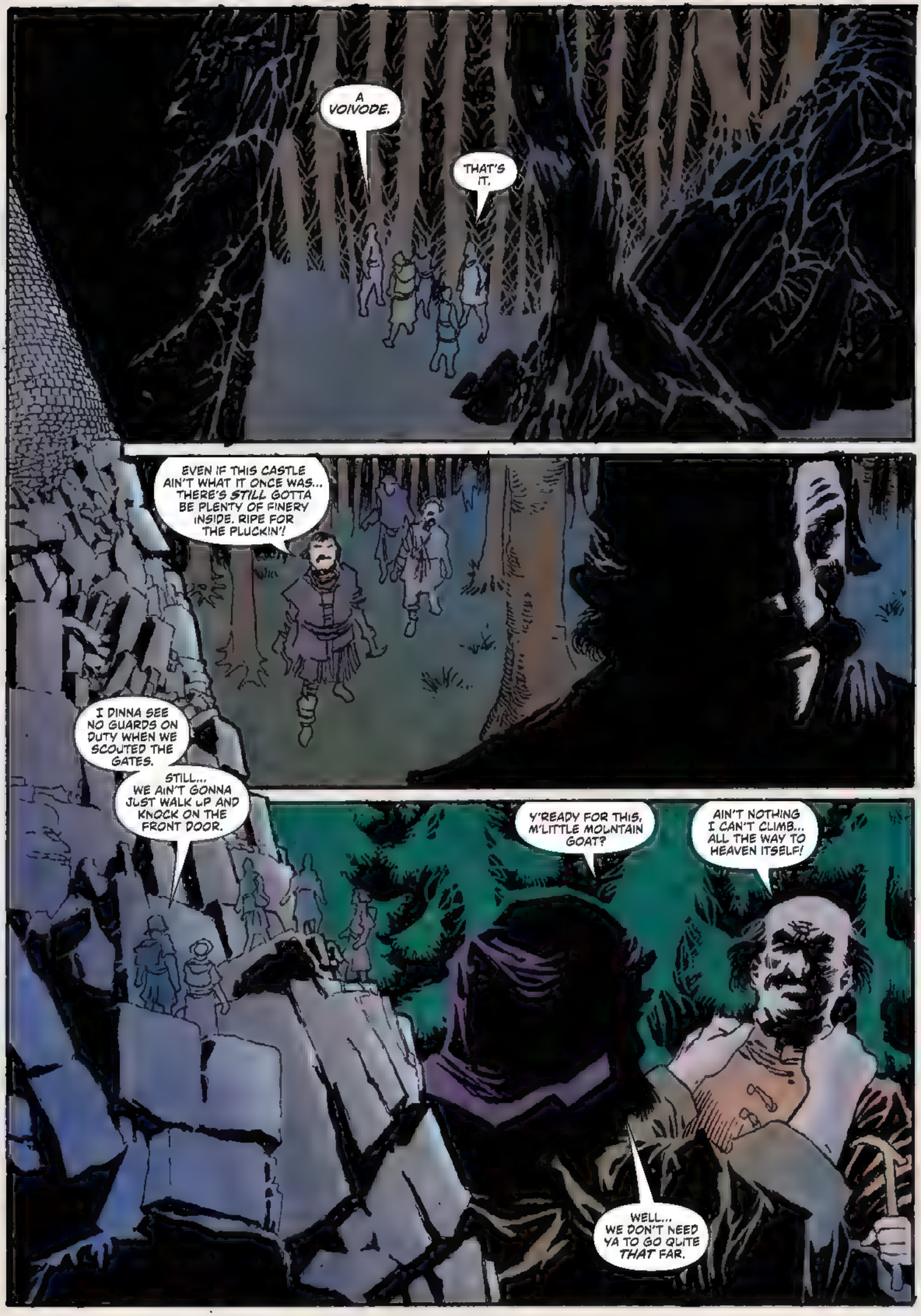

AND IRINA, EVER THE PEASANT, SOON FOLLOWED HER BETTER'S EXAMPLE.

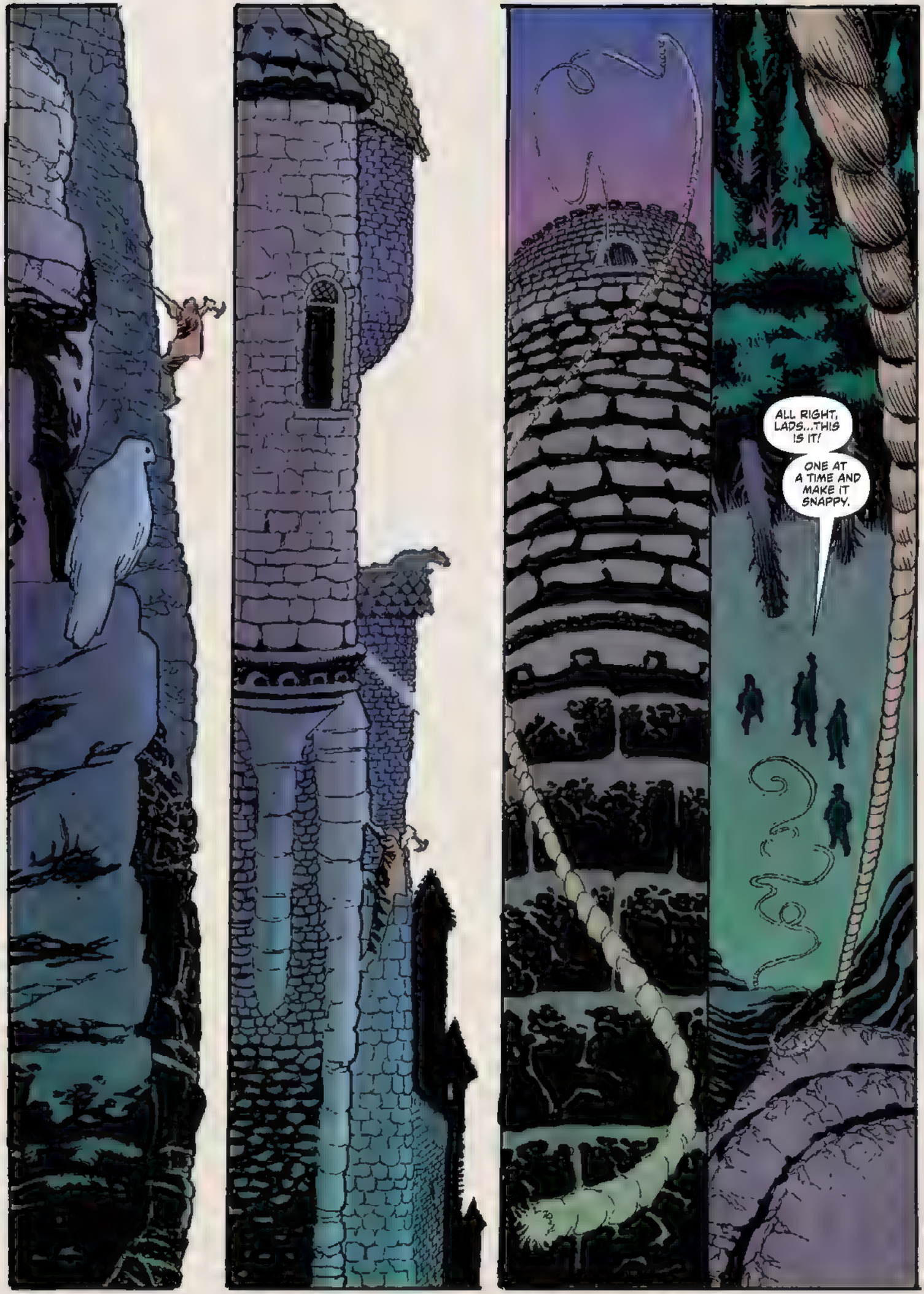

STILL, HERE THEY WERE EQUALS... MY UNDEAD BRIDES.
THE FRUITS OF MY SPECIAL MYSTERY, SENTIENT AND SENSUAL... PHANTASMIC AND RAVENOUS.
I REALIZED THIS WAS A GIFT I MUST SHARE SPARINGLY, LEST IT DEPLETE MY OWN DARK DOMINION.
SO, FOR NOW... MY HAREM WAS COMPLETE.


I enjoyed the company of my vampiric ladies... each with her own unique charms.
Unfortunately, Tatiana's transformation had cost her the narrative gifts I had once so admired.
Her attempts at storytelling were now dull as a banker's ledger.
a loss that left her distant and morose.
Her gloom was so deep, I even worried that she might try to destroy herself.
Yet one aspect of her new state averted that recourse.
Her taste for blood was voracious. She savored every feeding like a starving gourmand.
The red rest enslaved her deeper than any Turk's opium.

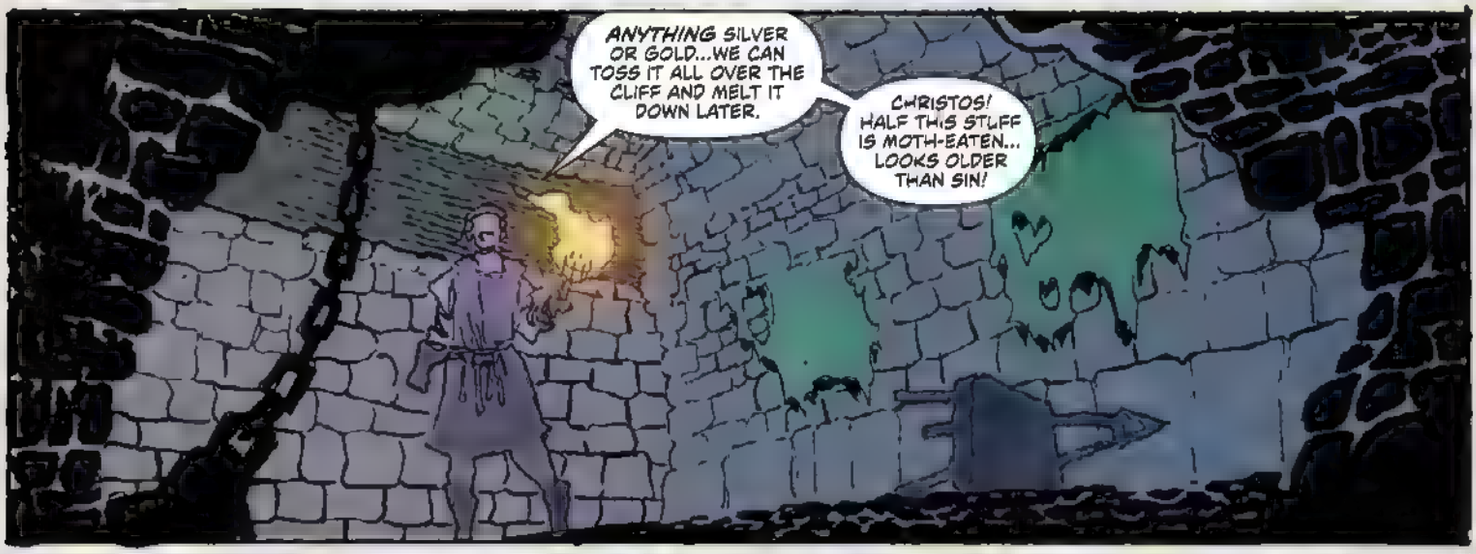
AFTER SEVERAL CENTURIES, THE CASTLE HAD BEGUN TO FALL INTO RUIN.
MY MERCENARY TROOPS HAD LONG SINCE FLED, NO LONGER ENTICED BY EITHER GOLD OR POTENTIAL GLORY.
EVEN THE GYPSIES IN MY THRALL NO LONGER LIVED INSIDE THE WALLS AND HAD SETTLED INTO AN ENCAMPMENT AT THE EDGE OF THE NEARBY WOODS.
ALL SAVE ONE.
KLOVIS...SON OF DINU, SON OF GRIGOR, SON OF LUCA, SON OF FENIX, AND FENIX BEFORE HIM.
THE PRODUCT OF GENERATIONS OF INBREEDING AMONGST MY VASSAL CLAN.
WHAT IS YOUR PLEASURE, MASTER?
I HAVE BUSINESS IN BISTRITA. SUMMON A DRIVER AND READY MY CARRIAGE.
AT ONCE, MILORD DRACULA!
THE CREATURE WAS LOYAL TO A FAULT, ALTHOUGH I KNEW HE YEARNED FOR MY POWERS TO EASE HIS PHYSICAL DEFECTS.

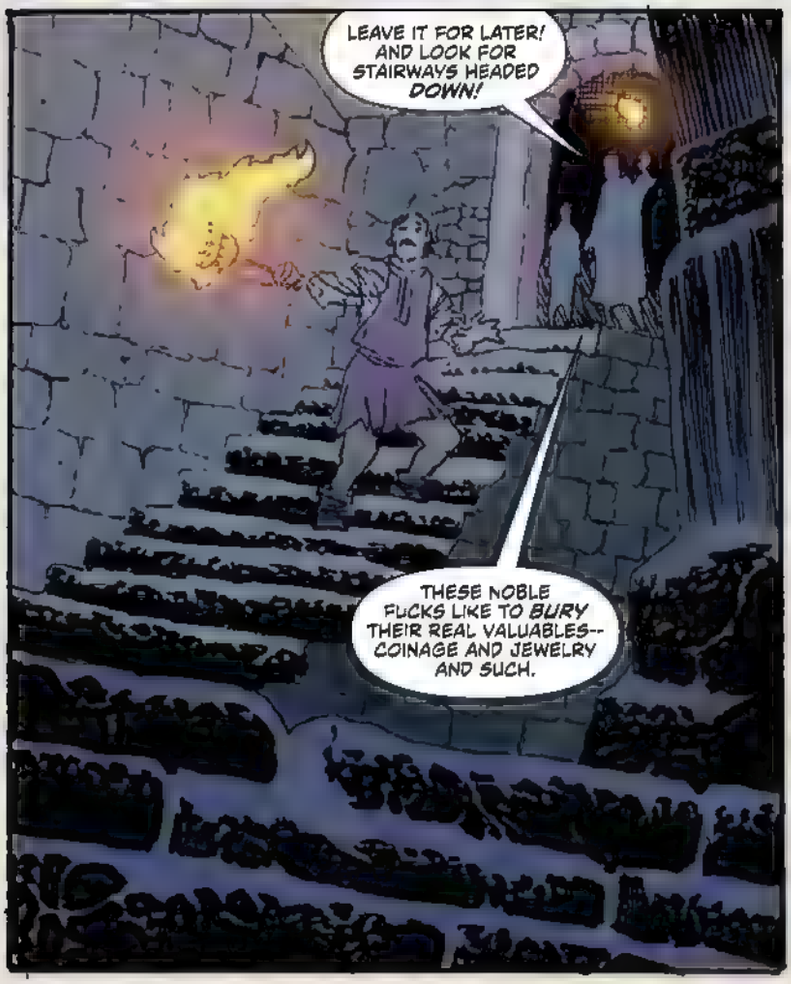
DESPITE MY INCREASINGLY ISOLATED EXISTENCE, I STILL SOUGHT TO EXTEND MY INFLUENCE AMONG THE WORLD OF THE LIVING.
THE CITY OF BISTRIȚA LAY HALF A DAY'S JOURNEY TO THE WEST.
I MADE ANNUAL VISITS THERE TO ESTABLISH MASTERY OVER CITIZENS WHO MIGHT PROVE VALUABLE TO MY NEEDS--BANKERS, MERCHANTS, SOLDIERS...EVEN DIPLOMATS AND WHORES.
A SINGLE TASTE OF THEIR BLOOD ON MY LIPS MADE ANY ONE OF THEM A SERVANT TO MY EVERY COMMAND.
THUS I SPREAD THE WEB OF MY DARK DOMINION... FAR MORE INSIDIOUS THAN ANY CONQUERING ARMY.
AS THESE SOJOURNS OFTEN TOOK DAYS TO COMPLETE, MY COACH'S BOTTOM WAS LINED WITH A THIN LAYER OF SOIL FROM THE CASTLE'S DEPTHS.
AN EFFECTIVE IF NOT LUXURIOUS REFUGE FOR MY DAILY SLUMBER.
THAT'S GOTTA BE HIM...THE OLD LORD OF THIS DUMP. WHAT'D THEY USED TO CALL 'IM?


A VOIVODE.
THAT'S IT.
EVEN IF THIS CASTLE AIN'T WHAT IT ONCE WAS... THERE'S *STILL* GOTTA BE PLENTY OF FINERY INSIDE. RIPE FOR THE PLUCKIN'!
I DINNA SEE NO GUARDS ON DUTY WHEN WE SCOUTED THE GATES.
STILL... WE AIN'T GONNA JUST WALK UP AND KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR.
Y'READY FOR THIS, M'LITTLE MOUNTAIN GOAT?
AIN'T NOTHING I CAN'T CLIMB... ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN ITSELF!
WELL... WE DON'T NEED YA TO GO QUITE *THAT* FAR.


ALL RIGHT, LADS...THIS IS IT!
ONE AT A TIME AND MAKE IT SNAPPY.

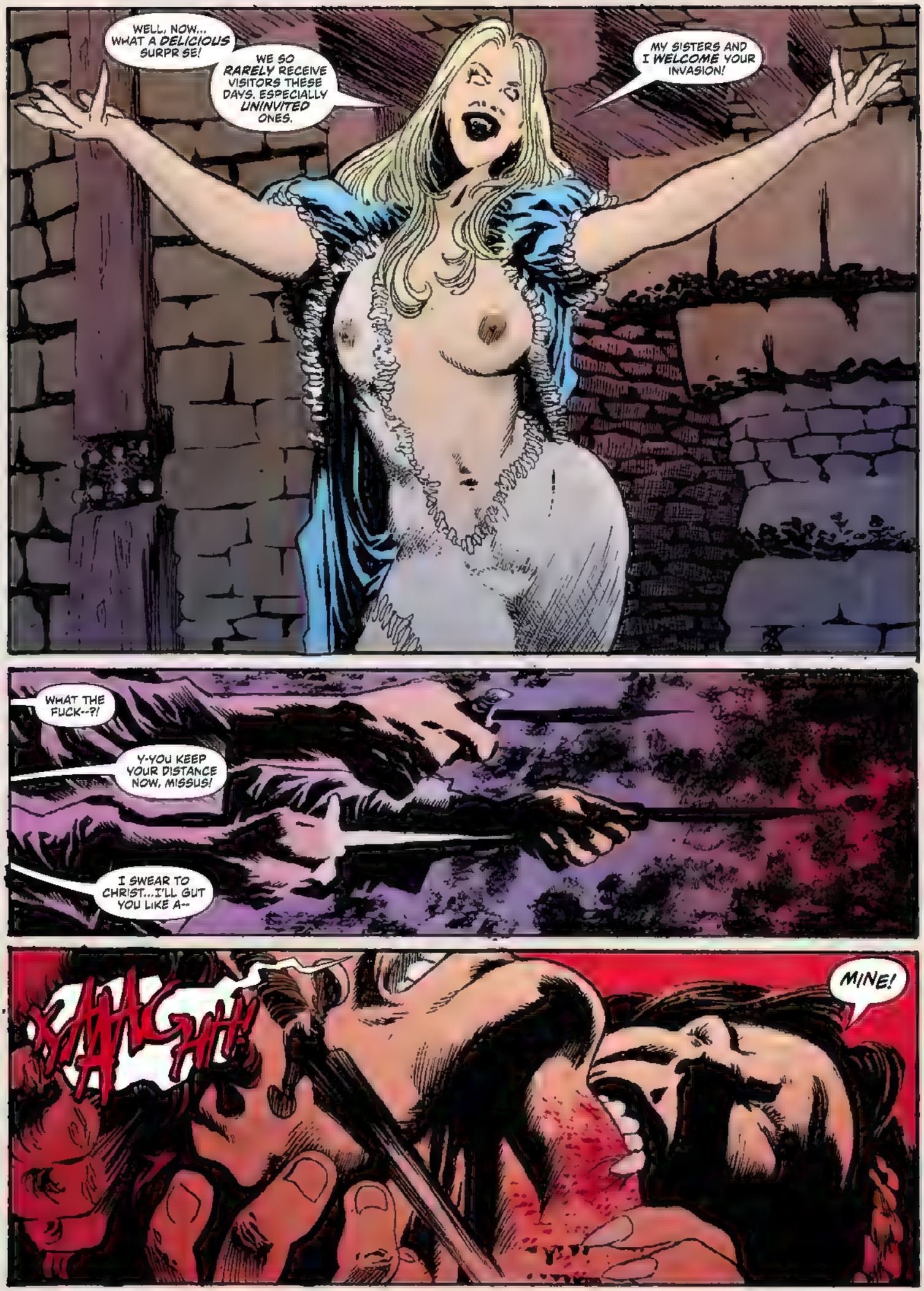
THAT'S GOT IT! LAST ONE LP AND IN!
OKAY, LADS... LIGHT 'EM UP AND LET'S GET MOVING.


ANYTHING SILVER OR GOLD...WE CAN TOSS IT ALL OVER THE CLIFF AND MELT IT DOWN LATER.
CHRISTOS! HALF THIS STUFF IS MOTH-EATEN... LOOKS OLDER THAN SIN!


LEAVE IT FOR LATER! AND LOOK FOR STAIRWAYS HEADED *DOWN!*
THESE NOBLE FUCKS LIKE TO *BURY* THEIR REAL VALUABLES-- COINAGE AND JEWELRY AND SUCH.

YESSS... THIS IS THE WAY! KEEP IT SHARP AND STEADY, LADS!

DARK AS A GODFORSAKEN TOMB DOWN HERE! AND, MADONNA... WHAT A STENCH!
HOLD UP...WHERE THE HELL'S ALEXI? HE WAS RIGHT BEHIND ME...
MUST'VE FOUND ANOTHER PASSAGE. WE'LL FIND 'IM LATER.
BUT BE ON YOUR GUARD. NO TELLING WHAT'S DOWN HERE--
AE-GHH!
WHAT TH' HELL--?! WHO WAS THAT?!
IT WAS SAVA! HE...HE'S GONE! SOMETHING--
CLOSE RANKS, Y'FUCKS!
WE CAN'T LET-- EH?!


WELL, NOW... WHAT A DELICIOUS SURPR SE!
WE SO RARELY RECEIVE VISITORS THESE DAYS. ESPECIALLY UNINVITED ONES.
MY SISTERS AND I WELCOME YOUR INVASION!
WHAT THE FUCK--?!
Y-YOU KEEP YOUR DISTANCE NOW, MISSUS!
I SWEAR TO CHRIST...I'LL GUT YOU LIKE A--
SAAAGHH!
MINE!

ARE YOU SCARED?
THAT MAKES THE BLOOD IN YOUR LIVER TASTE SO SWEET!
GAHH!
PATHETIC BEASTS.
YOU IMAGINE YOURSELVES RUTHLESS... BUT YOU KNOW NOTHING OF TRUE SAVAGERY!
EVEN ACROSS MILES, I HAD FELT MY BRIDES' SUDDEN FEROCITY AND THEIR ECSTASY.
WELCOME BACK, MASTER! THE MISTRESSES... THEY HAVE SECURED THE KEEP! AND NOW THEY CELEBRATE!
I ALERTED THEM! I ALERTED THEM!
THEY WERE, AFTER ALL, BRED OF MY BLOOD. INDELIBLY FUSED TO MY PSYCHE.
SHOW ME WHERE.
THIS WAY, MASTER...IN THE EAST WING!

I KNEW THAT SOMETHING STRIKING HAD OCCURRED IN MY ABSENCE.
I ONLY LATER LEARNED THE SOURCE OF THEIR ORGIASTIC FEAST...
A BAND OF BRIGANDS, SEEKING TO BURGLE WHAT THEY SAW AS A CITADEL PAST ITS PRIME.
AND LACKING ADEQUATE DEFENSES.
THEY NEVER COUNTED ON MY BRIDES.
PROUD AND DEADLY CONSORTS... OF THE HOUSE OF *DRACULA!*

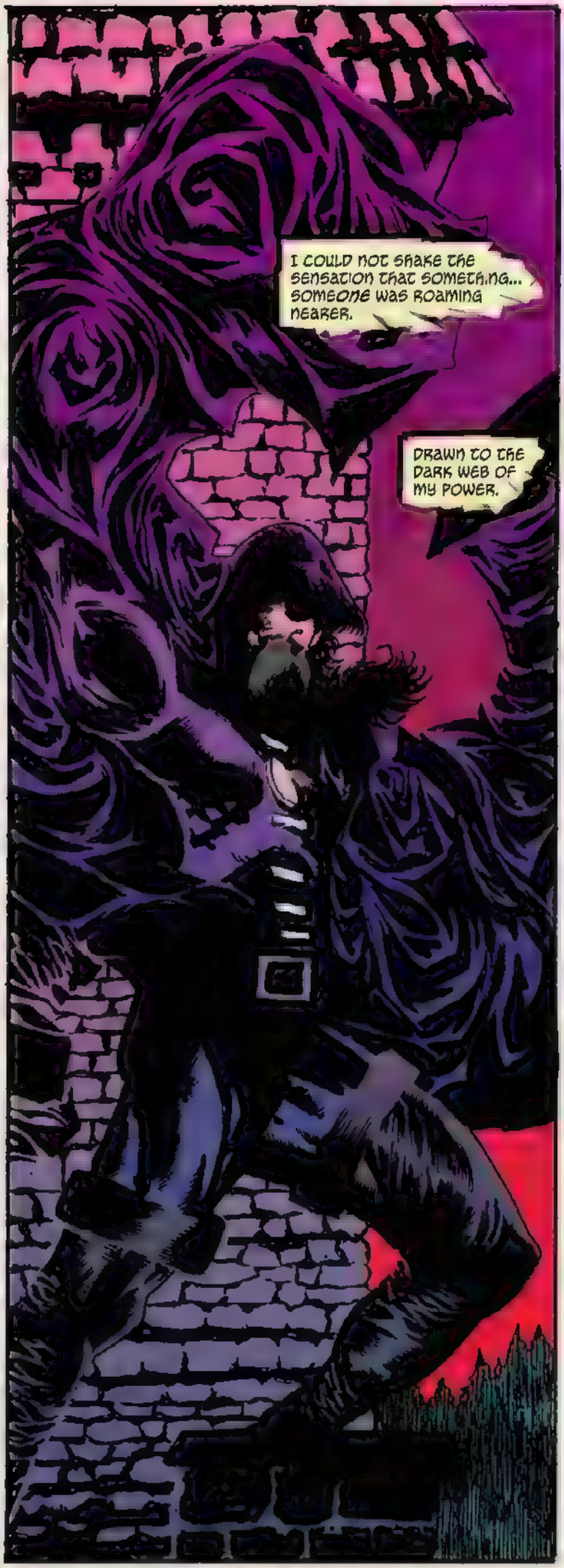
AFTER MY BRIDES HAD HAD THEIR FILL OF THESE ENCROACHING VERMIN...
IT WAS NECESSARY TO EXPUNGE THEIR REMAINS.
I HAD NO DESIRE TO SEE SUCH SCOUNDRELS RISE AND WALK...OR IN SOME CASES, CRAWL AGAIN.

QUITE AN ISOLATED KEEP. I WOULD'VE THOUGHT SUCH STRONGHOLDS DESERTED NOWADAYS.
THE REMNANTS OF A FEUDAL AGE, LONG PAST. AND YET...SOMETHING IS BEING PURGED!
WHO STILL LIVES IN THAT PLACE?
THIS IS THE BORGO PASS, HERR DOKTOR. HAVE YOU NEVER HEARD OF... CASTLE DRACULA?
THEY SAY THAT FAMILY IS IN LEAGUE WITH THE DEVIL HIMSELF!

NO...I'VE NEVER TRAVELED THIS FAR EAST BEFORE. WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF SUCH RUMORS?
PEOPLE WHO VENTURE TOO CLOSE TO THAT CASTLE ARE OFTEN NEVER SEEN AGAIN!
AND THEY SAY THAT ALL MANNER OF EVIL SPIRITS ROAM THE WOODS OF THESE HIGHLANDS! WEREWOLVES, GHOSTS, AND... NOSFERATU!
Hmm...MOST INTERESTING.
MEIN HERR, EXCUSE MY WEAK GERMAN BUT... WHAT SORT OF DOCTOR ARE YOU?
I SPECIALIZE IN THE STUDY OF DEADLY DISEASES...BUT I ALSO HAVE A KEEN INTEREST IN LOCAL LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE.
I TEACH AT THE UNIVERSITY IN AMSTERDAM.
BUT MY FAMILY IS ORIGINALLY FROM SWEDEN...THE CITY OF HELSINGBORG.

MORE DECADES PASSED, LIKE LEAVES FALLING FROM A MIGHTY OAK.
UNNOTICED BY EITHER THE BRIDES OR MYSELF, WHO ROSE TO GREET EVERY NIGHT THE SAME AS THE LAST.
PRETERNATURALLY UNTOUCHED BY TIME'S STEADY AND PITILESS TOLL.

UNTIL, ONE DAY...I BEGAN TO EXPERIENCE A VEXING FEELING OF UNEASE.
A WHISPERED HINT OF A ONCE-FAMILIAR PRESENCE.

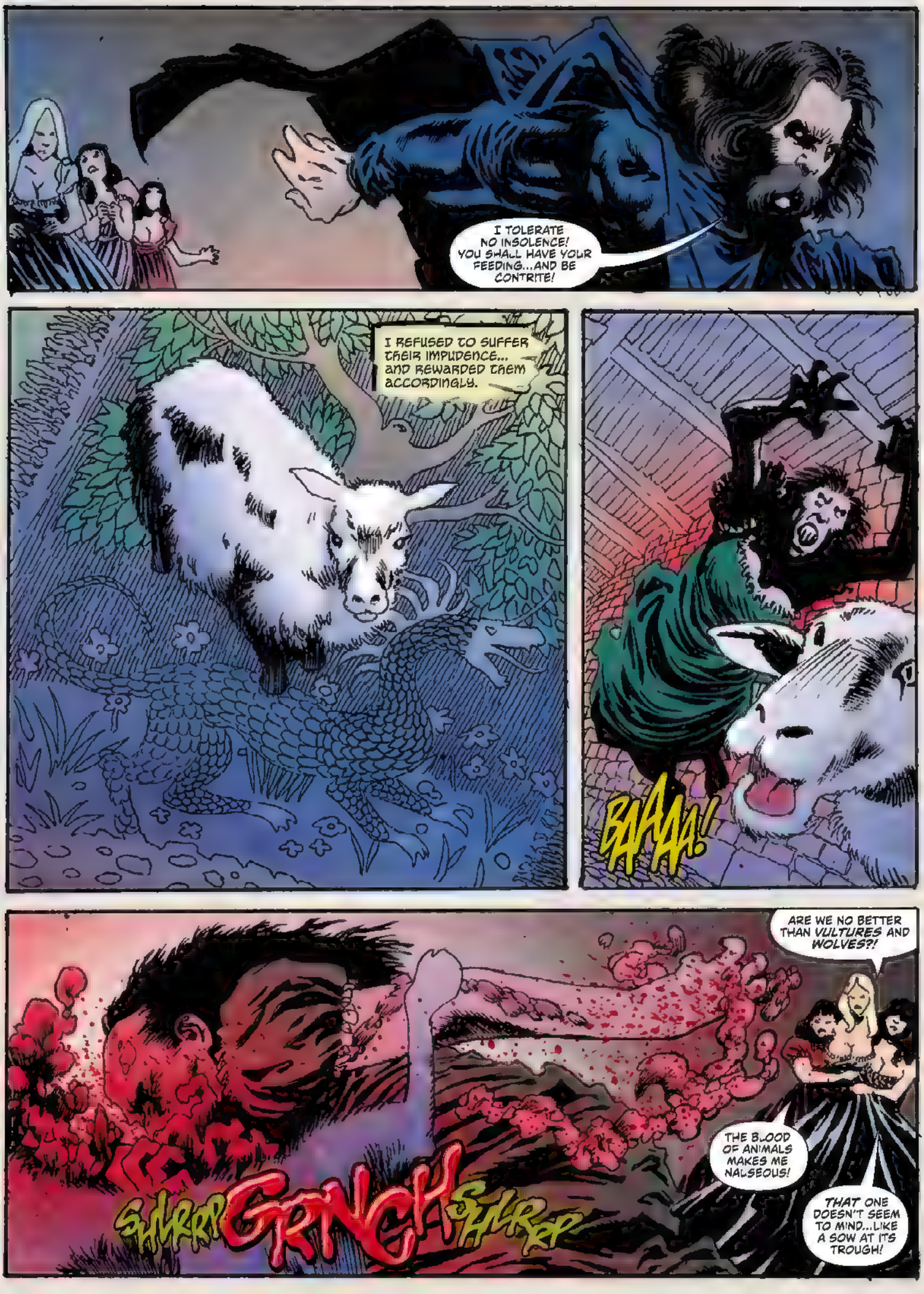

I COULD NOT SHAKE THE SENSATION THAT SOMETHING... SOMEONE WAS ROAMING NEARER.
DRAWN TO THE DARK WEB OF MY POWER.

LIKE A BEE RETURNING TO ITS LONG-LOST HIVE.
MY APPETITE WANED AND I FOUND I COULDN'T FOCUS ON ANY OTHER ENDEAVOR.
I HAD TO FIND THAT WHICH WAS SEEMINGLY STALKING ME.
FOR WEEKS, I COMBED THE FORESTS SURROUNDING THE CASTLE...TO NO AVAIL.
STILL, THERE WAS EVER THIS THROBBING SENSE OF CONNECTION TO... I KNEW NOT WHAT.
UNTIL, FINALLY...

UNNGH...
...FNH...
...VSHHK...
N-NAKI..?!
It was... SHE!
My fellow student at Satan's Scholomance.
NAKEISHA!
My feisty and sultry lover.
My first, unsuspecting victim.
I could still recall the lusc.ous taste of her...the first b.ood across my l.ps.
naive about my new existence, I'd left her corpse to rise.
and THIS was the result.

V... VLAD.
UNNGH... VLAD.
against all odds, she'd somehow survived centuries as a roaming NOSFERATU.
VLAD... HAN'SOME VLAD!
RIGH' ONE...RIGH' ONE IN! VLAD!
a fate that not many such creatures can endure.
PEACE, NAKEISHA.
BE STILL.
and somehow...she was inexorably drawn to seek me out.
to rejoin her maker.
COME, NAKEISHA.
FOLLOW ME.
VLAD...
and thus... I felt an obligation to this pathetic fiend that I had spawned.

WHAT IS... THAT?!
SHE...IT...SMELLS OF CORRUPTION--AS FOUL AS GARLIC! WHY MUST WE ENDURE THE PRESENCE OF THIS TRAVESTY?!
MILORD... WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT HER HERE?
AS I EXPECTED...THE OTHER BRIDES WERE LESS THAN WELCOMING OF THE NEWEST "SISTER."
MY LOVELIES... THIS IS NAKEISHA. SHE WAS MY FIRST TURNED AND, AFTER CENTURIES, SHE HAS WANDERED FAR TO REATTACH HERSELF TO ME.
SHE IS AS ONE OF YOU... AND I WOULD HAVE ALL OF YOU TREAT HER AS YOUR EQUAL.
MILORD DRACULA... YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!
CAN SHE EVEN SPEAK?
IT'S BEEN WEEKS SINCE YOU FED US... AND NOW, THIS?!
SILENCE!
I AM YOUR LORD AND MASTER...YOU WILL DO AS I SAY!


I TOLERATE NO INSOLENCE! YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR FEEDING...AND BE CONTRITE!
I REFUSED TO SUFFER THEIR IMPUDENCE... AND REWARDED THEM ACCORDINGLY.
BAAAA!
ARE WE NO BETTER THAN VULTURES AND WOLVES?!
THE BLOOD OF ANIMALS MAKES ME NAUSEOUS!
THAT ONE DOESN'T SEEM TO MIND...LIKE A SOW AT ITS TROUGH!
SHRRP GRNGH SHRRP

UNLIKE THE OTHERS, NAKEISHA WOULDN'T RESPECT THE CASTLE'S BORDERS.
AND MY WARDING CHARMS DID LITTLE TO AFFECT HER MOBILITY.
SO I WAS FORCED TO RESORT TO CRUDER METHODS FOR HER CONSTRAINT.
THE OTHERS PRESENTED A DIFFERENT SET OF PROBLEMS.
MILORD... PLEEASE!
WE BEG YOU...BRING US A PROPER MEAL! SOMEONE YOUNG AND RIPE!
ARE WE TO HAVE NOTHING?!
BEGONE! YOU ARE MINE TO COMMAND... AND MINE TO MAINTAIN.
AS ALWAYS... I WILL PROVIDE. IF ONLY TO SILENCE YOUR CATERWALLING!

UNFORTUNATELY, THE VILLAGERS OF TAUTA HAD BECOME EXTRA WARY OF MY HUNTING EXCURSIONS.
SAFEGUARDS AGAINST THE OCCULT WERE COMMON AND NOCTURNAL ACTIVITY SCARCE.
THANKFULLY, THERE WAS STILL THE OCCASIONAL COACH ALONG THE BORGO PASS.
AND A COACH IS NOT A DWELLING.
I EVEN FORWENT MY OWN HUNGER, ALL TO ASSUAGE WHAT HAD SUDDENLY BECOME MY PETULANT AND UNRULY HAREM.

HOW and WHEN DID I BECOME SO ENTANGLED--
OH!
MI'LORD... YOU HAVE RETURNED.
YOU WERE GONE SO LONG! W-WE HAD NO IDEA WHEN YOU WOULD--
SNRGH... GLRK
MMNP... V-VLAD?
OH, MY SPIRITED NAKI... WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOU?
V-VLAD... RIGH' ONE.
DON' VHNFF--

LOATHSOME BITCHES!! IS THIS HOW YOU SHOW YOUR OBEISANCE?
IS THIS HOW YOU HEED YOUR DARK LORD AND MASTER?!
SKRAK
I BADE YOU HONOR AND ACCEPT HER!
YOU--
=GCK=
--YOU WOULD HAVE US RECEIVE A GHOUL?!
=GRK=
A SHAMBLING CORPSE WITH NO MORE AWARENESS THAN A BOG TOAD?!
WE THREE... FOR WHOM YOU ONCE PROFESSED LOVE...ARE ABOVE THIS PATHETIC, CADAVEROUS WRETCH!
AND YOU LEFT US HERE STARVING!
GRRREKKK
UKK... URRK--
BRRAAGH!
GGLAARG!
BEHOLD... THE COST OF YOUR INSUBORDINATION! YOU ARE MEANT TO FEED ON THE LIVING...NOT THE UNDEAD!
BLLEGGGH!

WALLOW IN YOUR SHAME...AND THEN RETURN TO YOUR COFFINS!
I WILL HAVE LOWLY KLOVIS SWAB UP THE RESULTS OF YOUR FOLLY.
MY DEAR, BRAVE, AND RESILIENT NAKEISHA.
I HAD NEVER MEANT TO BE THE CAUSE OF YOUR DEATH.
NOR THE SPUR OF YOUR UNDEATH.
IF ONLY I HAD NOT BEEN SUCH A NOVICE TO MY POWER... I MIGHT HAVE SHARED THE TRUE KISS OF ETERNITY WITH YOU.
THIS WAS ONE OF THE ONLY MOMENTS IN WHICH I'D EVER KNOWN...REGRET.

By this point, my legend had spread all across the Carpathians.
Haunted whispers told of my bloodthirsty blight as far away as Bucharest, Budapest, and Kraków.
Still, as I said... it was the villagers of Tihuta who were most cautious of my attentions.
The mayor of this mountain hamlet was a weak and venal man.
With a mistress half his age.
Primar Geofri Murga would serve me well as a wedge to get past the town's cautions.

after all...
...every lion has its jackal.
you understand? you will do all that i command and in return...when the time pleases me...i will grant you eternal life.
y-yes, master...

and, like a jackal, the primar was adept at flush.ng out prey.
geofri... are you sure? it is so late!
yes, my dear. don't be like those silly old wives... it's perfectly safe!
it was an equitable arrangement that proved fruitful for several years.
the br des were assuaged.
and the castle, at last... at peace.

It was around this time that my own feedings grew more and more infrequent.
With three ravenous mouths to fill, I sometimes went months without tasting human blood.
The red hunger ached inside me like a roaring fire. Yet here as in all things, I was its master...
The sap of animals and vermin was enough to sustain me.
A survival-st diet that provided little beyond sheer nourishment.
How I longed for the thrill of a true hunt...to feel the surge of predation and taste the ruby gush of vitality.

MASTER... LONG HAVE I SERVED YOUR WISHES A-AND, WELL...YOU PROMISED ME--
THAT IS... I'M...YES, I'M CONTENT WITH MY SPIDERS AND FLIES. THEIR LIFE FORCE FILLS ME UP! BUT I WAS WONDERING...
THIS BOY IS YOUNG AND HALE...MIGHT I JUST--?
NO.
PRIMAR MURGA...YOUR REWARDS ARE AT MY DISCRETION. AND THAT TIME IS NOT NOW.
USE YOUR SPIDERS TO ENSNARE SOME SPARROWS. YOU WILL FIND THEM... MORE VITALIZING.
Y-YES, MASTER! TH-THANK YOU, MASTER!
ALWAYS... AS YOU COMMAND! THY WILL BE DONE...
AH--!

THERE HE IS... THE SKULKING RAT!
WHAT SINFUL BUSINESS ARE YOU ABOUT AT THIS HOUR?!
M-MY STEFAN... W-WHERE IS HE?!
I... I SAW YOU TALKING TO HIM!
Y-YOU VILE BEAST...WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY STEFAN?!
WHERE IS HE?!
HERE NOW, ANA...THAT'S ENOUGH.
LEAVE HIM TO US!
I...I DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE'S TALKING ABOUT!
I NEVER TOUCHED HER SON--
SHUT YOUR FILTHY MOUTH, SNAKE!
SMAK

WE KNOW WHO YOU'RE IN LEAGUE WITH!
WHOSE CARRIAGE YOU WELCOME WHEN ALL OTHER DOORS ARE SHUT TIGHT!
FOR FAR TOO LONG, THIS VILLAGE HAS LIVED IN FEAR OF THAT DEVIL WHO CLOISTERS HIMSELF IN THE CASTLE BEYOND THE PASS!
HOW MANY MORE OF OUR PRECIOUS WOMEN AND CHILDREN MUST WE LOSE TO HIS WICKED BLOOD LUST?!
NO, WAIT... PLEASE--
I SAY ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!
IT'S TIME WE HAD VENGEANCE FOR EVERY SOUL LOST TO THAT GODFORSAKEN MONSTER!
"BRING WHATEVER WEAPONS YOU CAN MUSTER! AND FIRE!
"AND THE CROSS FROM THE CHURCH'S ALTAR!"

AFTER CENTURIES, I KNEW EVERY STONE OF MY CASTLE AS I KNEW MY OWN FINGERS AND TOES.
I WAS AWARE OF THIS MOB'S PRESENCE THE MOMENT THEY SET FOOT ON THE CAUSEWAY.
MASTER... MASTER!
A HORDE OF VILLAGERS APPROACHES!
THEY ARE COMING HERE...TO THE CASTLE!
I KNOW, KLOVIS.
BEGONE NOW.
CHOOSE A PERCH AND SEE HOW YOUR MASTER DEALS WITH SUCH MISCREANTS!

MILORD... WHAT IS HAPPENING?!
WE HEAR SHOUTING AND THE TROMP OF MANY FEET!
SURELY... THIS IS MORE THAN WE CAN EAT IN ONE FEEDING?
STAY CALM, MY LOVELIES. THIS RABBLE ARE AGITATED... AND HAVE FORGOTTEN THEIR PLACE.
I WILL REMIND THEM OF THEIR LOWLY STATION, AS I HAVE ALWAYS DONE.
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE CASTLE'S HISTORY... INVADERS HAD BREACHED ITS PERIMETER.
IT WAS ALSO THE LAST.

DRACULA!
WE'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR ATROCITIES!
AND WE HAVE YOUR SLAVE... OUR SUPPOSED "MAYOR"!
COME, JOIN THIS TRAITOROUS WRETCH...AND WE'LL BURN BOTH OF YOU AT THE STAKE!
BEHOLD... AN ASSEMBLY OF PEASANTS AND FOOLS!
HOW *DARE* YOU ENTER MY HOUSE UNINVITED?!
I SHOULD HAVE ALL OF YOU *IMPALED*... AND LINE THE BORGO PASS WITH YOUR CORPSES AS A WARNING TO ANY OTHER INSURGENTS!

DISPERSE NOW!
RETURN TO YOUR HOMES WHILE YOU STILL CAN!
I SHALL NOT WARN YOU AGAIN.

YOU CAN'T SCARE US, MONSTER!
WE HAVE THE BLESSING AND GRACE OF ALMIGHTY GOD ON OUR SIDE!

I CAN FEEL YOUR FERVOR...BUT YOUR WRETCHED CRUCIFIX IS A DISTANT DISPLAY. IT MIGHT AS WELL BE AN ARCHER TRYING TO STRIKE ME FROM A MILE HENCE.

YOUR RIGHTEOUS WRATH IS NOTHING COMPARED TO MY POWER!

KA-ZAR
MOTHER OF GOD!
THE CROSS! THE DEVIL HAS DEFILED THE CROSS!
HELP US, DEAR LORD!
TRESPASSERS!
BUFFOONS!
NOW YOU KNOW! NOW YOU SEE THE MASTER'S TRUE MIGHT!

KRAKKK
AGGGHH!
LOOK OUT!
WHAM
KRAK
KRAAK
THE MASTER IS SUPREME! HE IS MERCILESS!
HIS FURY AND JUDGMENT FALL UPON ALL OF YOU!!
EH--?!

SMASH
LET ALL WHO DEFY MY WISHES BEWARE... THERE IS NO PITY FOR YOUR INSOLENCE!
EVERYONE... STAND FAST!
LOOK... THE STORM PASSES, THE RAINS RECEDE!
THAT'S IT... TAKE UP YOUR ARMS!
WE MUST SCOURGE THIS PESTILENCE!

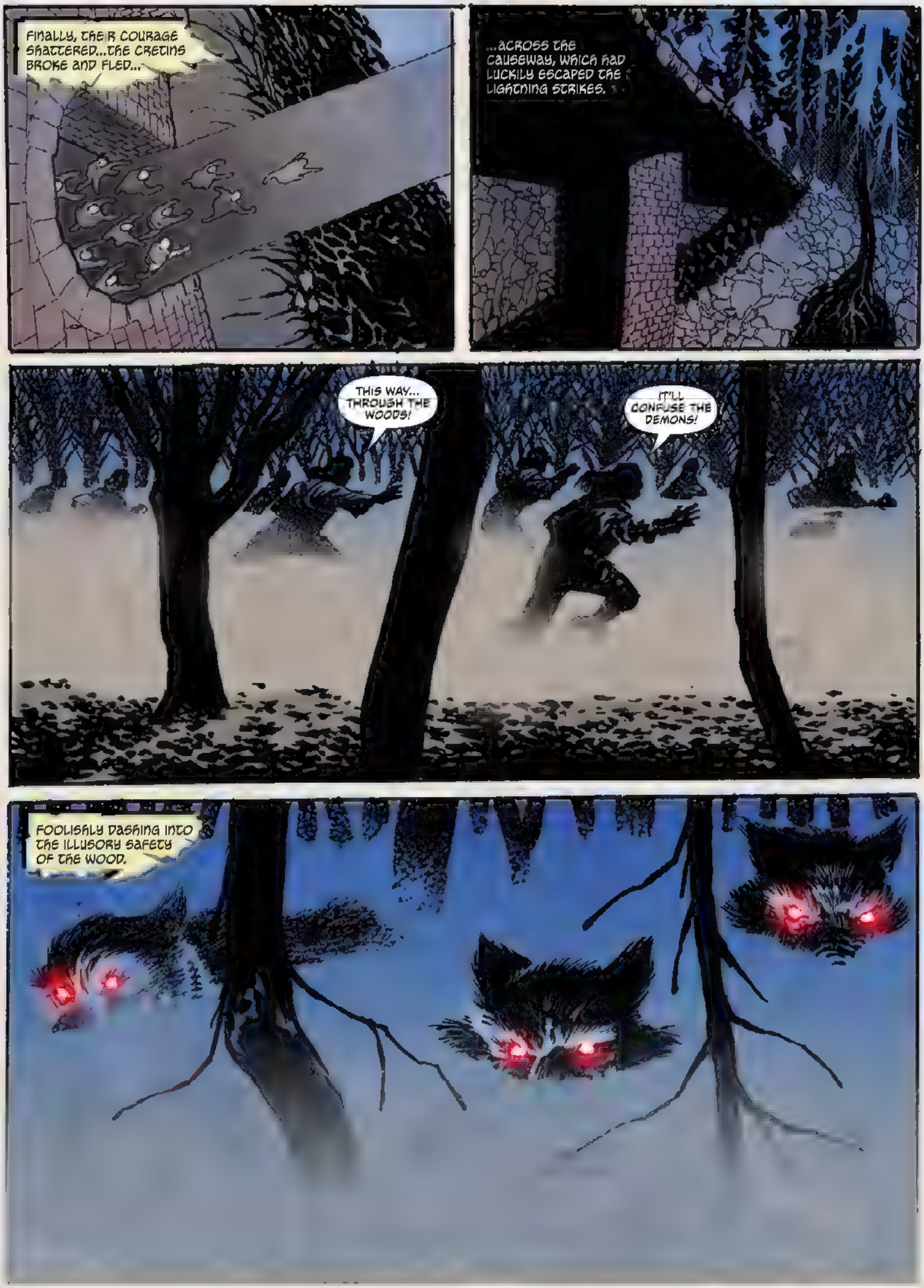
YOU THINK YOU KNOW CONTAGION AND DEATH?

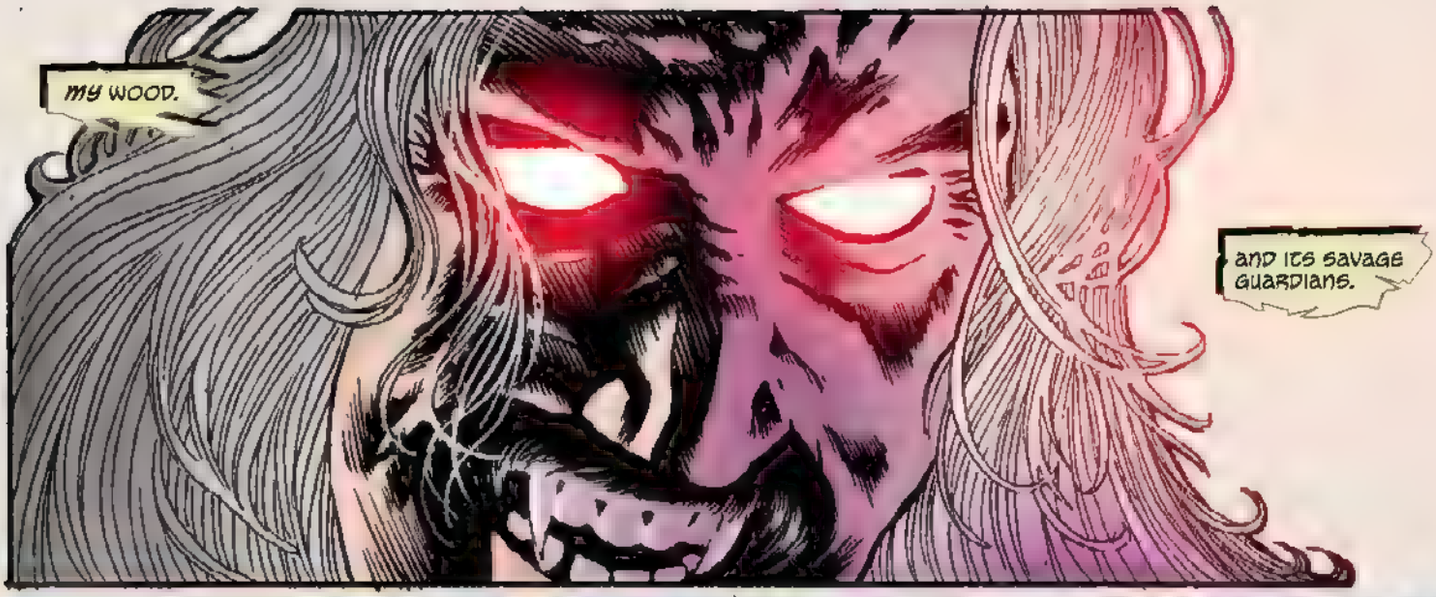
"ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE THEIR EMISSARIES!"

DEAR GOD... RATS!!
YAAAAGGH!
NOOOO!!

NOOOO!
SO MANY... GOD IN HEAVEN!!
FOUL! UNCLEAN!
GET THEM OFF ME!
AAAGGH!
SAVE US... SAVE US!
MNGH--!
:GHK:
KOOSH
DIE, VERMIN!

STILL YOU PERSIST?
YOU WILL FIND THAT THE AGENTS OF MY VENGEANCE ARRIVE FROM BELOW... AND ON HIGH!
SCRREEEE
NO...NO... NOOOO!
AAGGHH!


FINALLY, THEIR COURAGE SHATTERED...THE CRETINS BROKE AND FLED...
...ACROSS THE CAUSEWAY, WHICH HAD LUCKILY ESCAPED THE LIGHTNING STRIKES.
THIS WAY... THROUGH THE WOODS!
IT'LL CONFUSE THE DEMONS!
FOOLISHLY DASHING INTO THE ILLUSORY SAFETY OF THE WOOD.

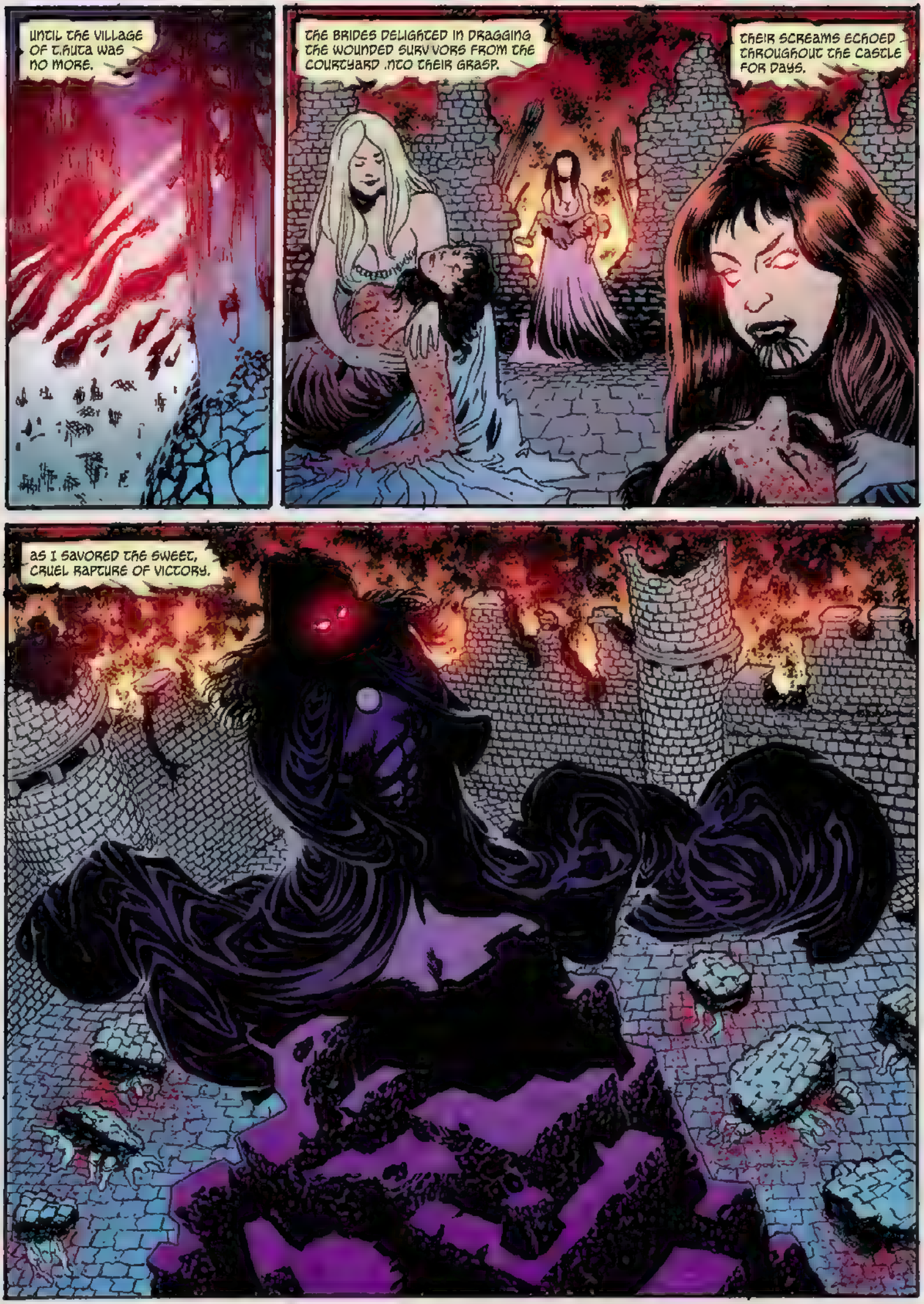

my WOOD.
and its savage guardians.

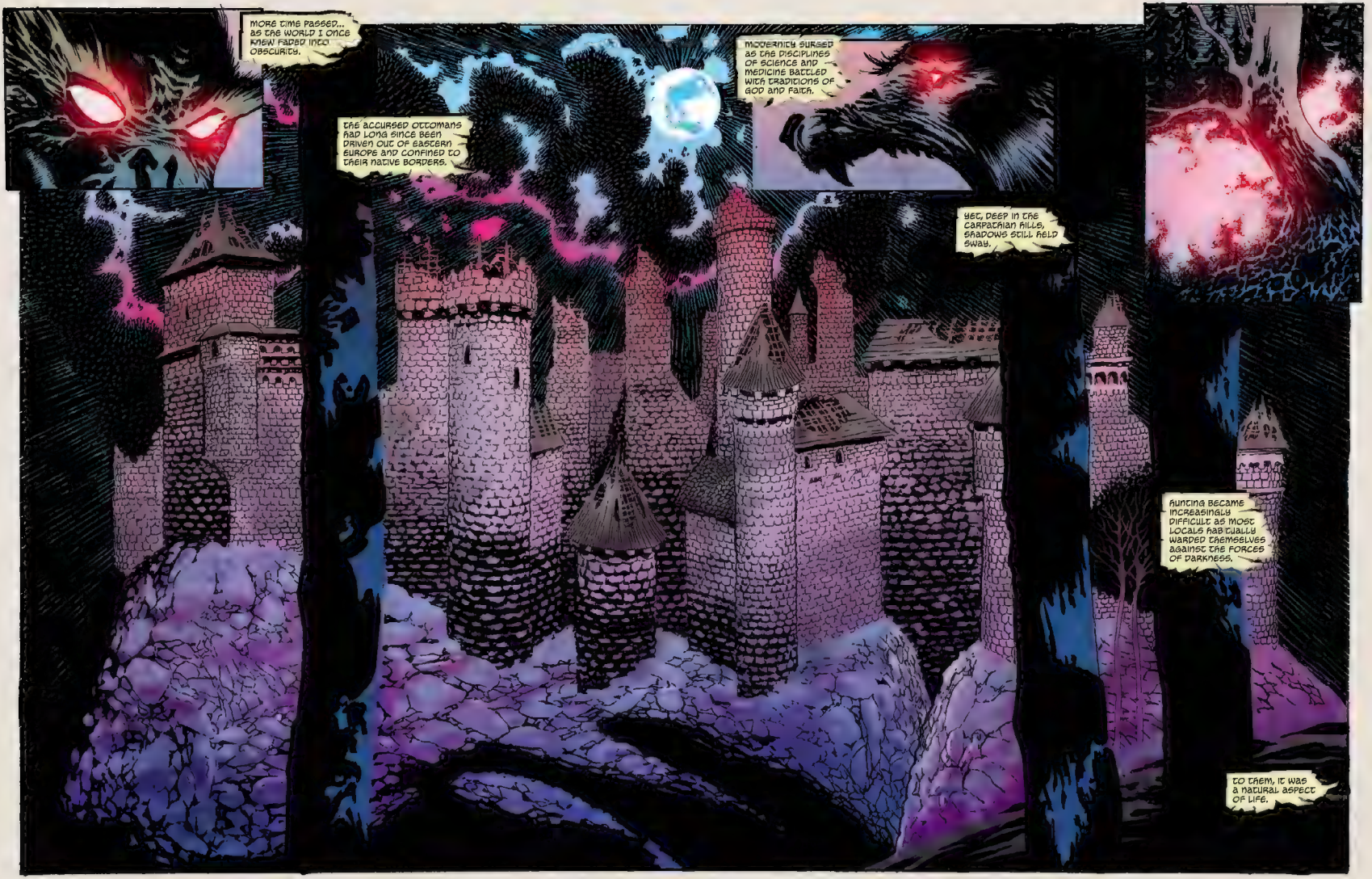
the fierce and feral children of the night.
N-NO!
LUPI!!!

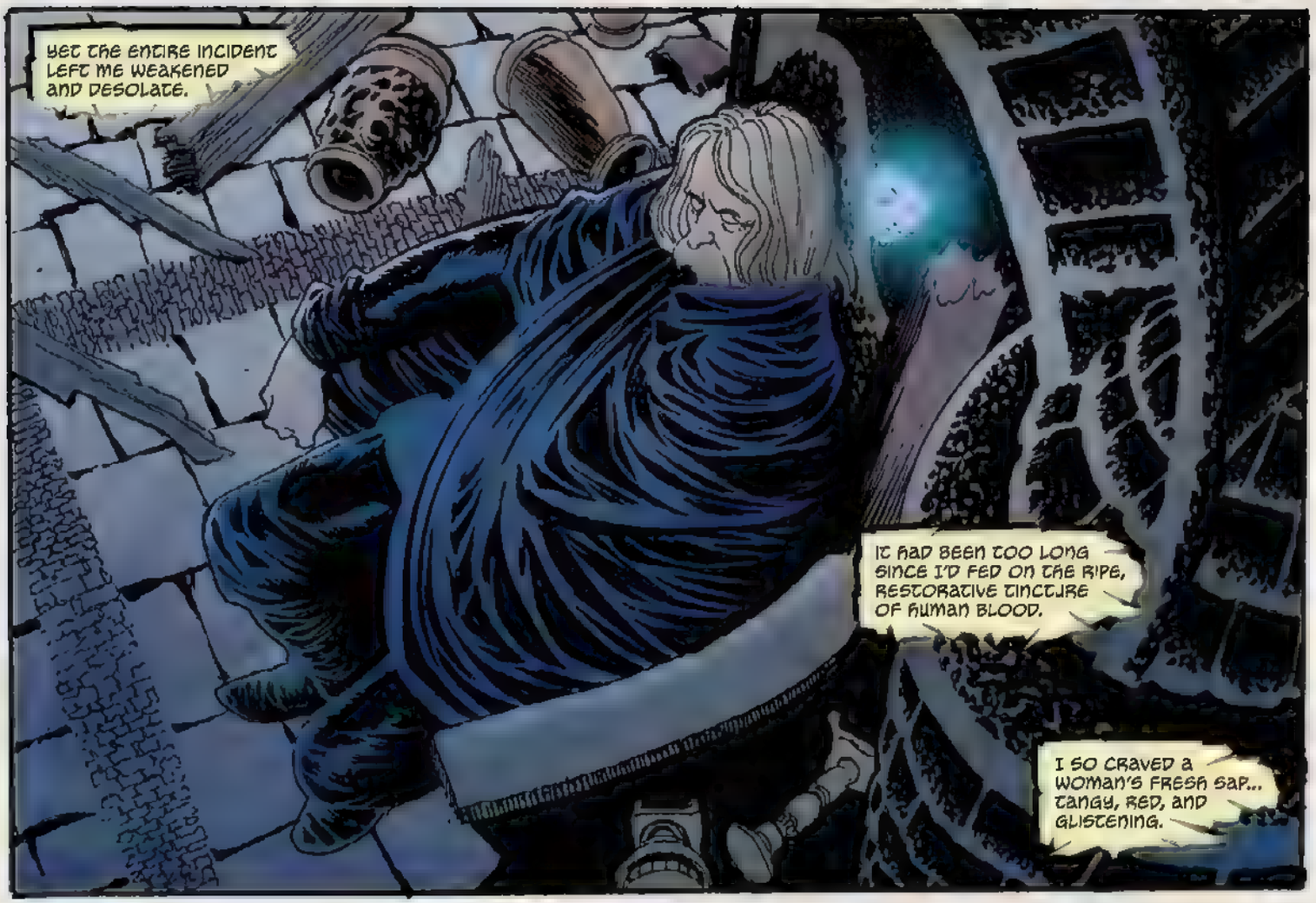
It was a massacre.

EVEN THE STRONGEST VILLAGERS WERE NO MATCH FOR THE PACK'S ASSEMBLED ATTACK.
A FRENZIED MELEE THAT LEFT NO RIOTER ALIVE.
ON ONE LEVEL...IT WAS A TRAGIC WASTE OF VITAL AND SUCCULENT BLOOD.
STILL, I WOULD NEVER DENY THE PACK SUCH A FEAST IN RETURN FOR THEIR STURDY FEALTY.
ALL THOSE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO TURN THEIR PATHETIC RAGE AGAINST ME WERE THUS ERADICATED.

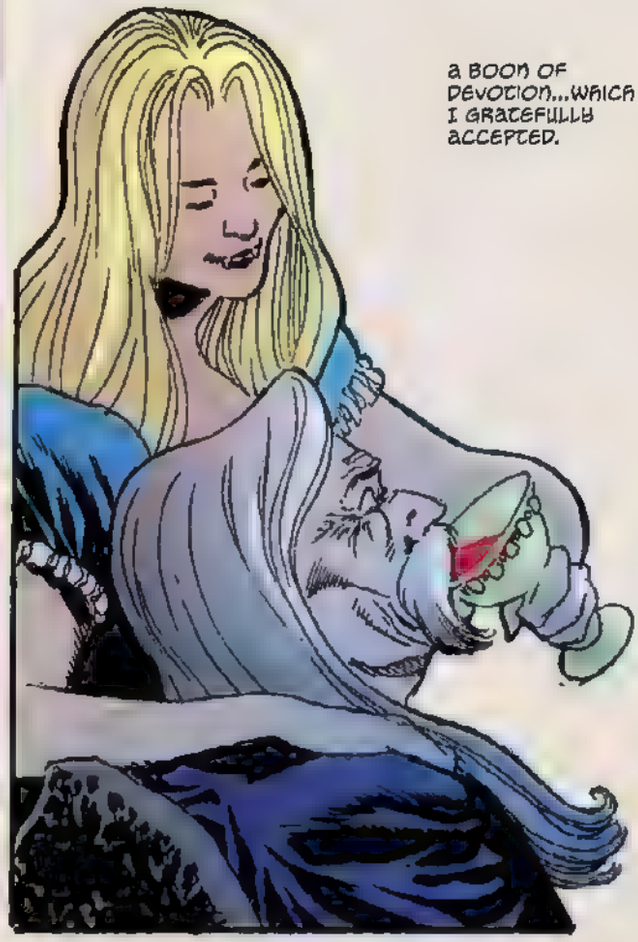
and the defenseless town now stood all but abandoned.
inhabited only by those too young or too old to join the rebellion.
remnants that my gypsies soon dispatched as well.
they put every local structure to the torch.
searing my vengeance as surely as any army i'd ever commanded.

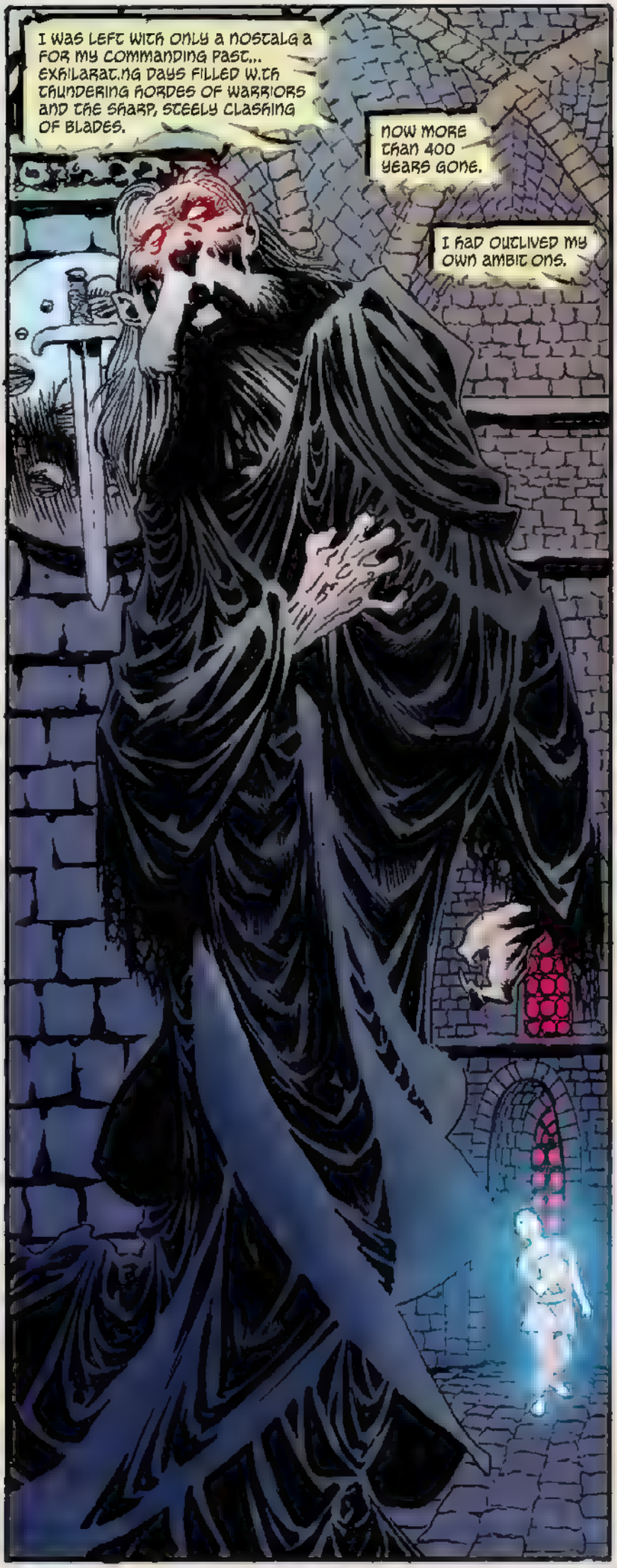

UNTIL THE VILLAGE OF THUTA WAS NO MORE.
THE BRIDES DELIGHTED IN DRAGGING THE WOUNDED SURVIVORS FROM THE COURTYARD INTO THEIR GRASP.
THEIR SCREAMS ECHOED THROUGHOUT THE CASTLE FOR DAYS.
AS I SAVORED THE SWEET, CRUEL RAPTURE OF VICTORY.


MORE TIME PASSED... AS THE WORLD I ONCE KNEW FADED INTO OBSCURITY.
THE ACCURSED OTTOMANS HAD LONG SINCE BEEN DRIVEN OUT OF EASTERN EUROPE AND CONFINED TO THEIR NATIVE BORDERS.
MODERNITY SURGED AS THE DISCIPLINES OF SCIENCE AND MEDICINE BATTLED WITH TRADITIONS OF GOD AND FAITH.
YET, DEEP IN THE CARPATHIAN HILLS, SHADOWS STILL HELD SWAY.
HUNTING BECAME INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT AS MOST LOCALS HABITUALLY WARDED THEMSELVES AGAINST THE FORCES OF DARKNESS.
TO THEM, IT WAS A NATURAL ASPECT OF LIFE.


YET THE ENTIRE INCIDENT LEFT ME WEAKENED AND DESOLATE.
IT HAD BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I'D FED ON THE RIPE, RESTORATIVE TINCTURE OF HUMAN BLOOD.
I SO CRAVED A WOMAN'S FRESH SAP... TANGY, RED, AND GLISTENING.

FOR ONCE...THE BRIDES ATTENDED AND SAW TO MY FEEDING, INSTEAD OF I TO THEIRS.


A BOON OF DEVOTION...WHICH I GRATEFULLY ACCEPTED.


I WAS LEFT WITH ONLY A NOSTALG A FOR MY COMMANDING PAST... EXHILARAT.NG DAYS FILLED W.TH THUNDERING HORDES OF WARRIORS AND THE SHARP, STEELY CLASHING OF BLADES.
NOW MORE THAN 400 YEARS GONE.
I HAD OUTLIVED MY OWN AMBIT ONS.

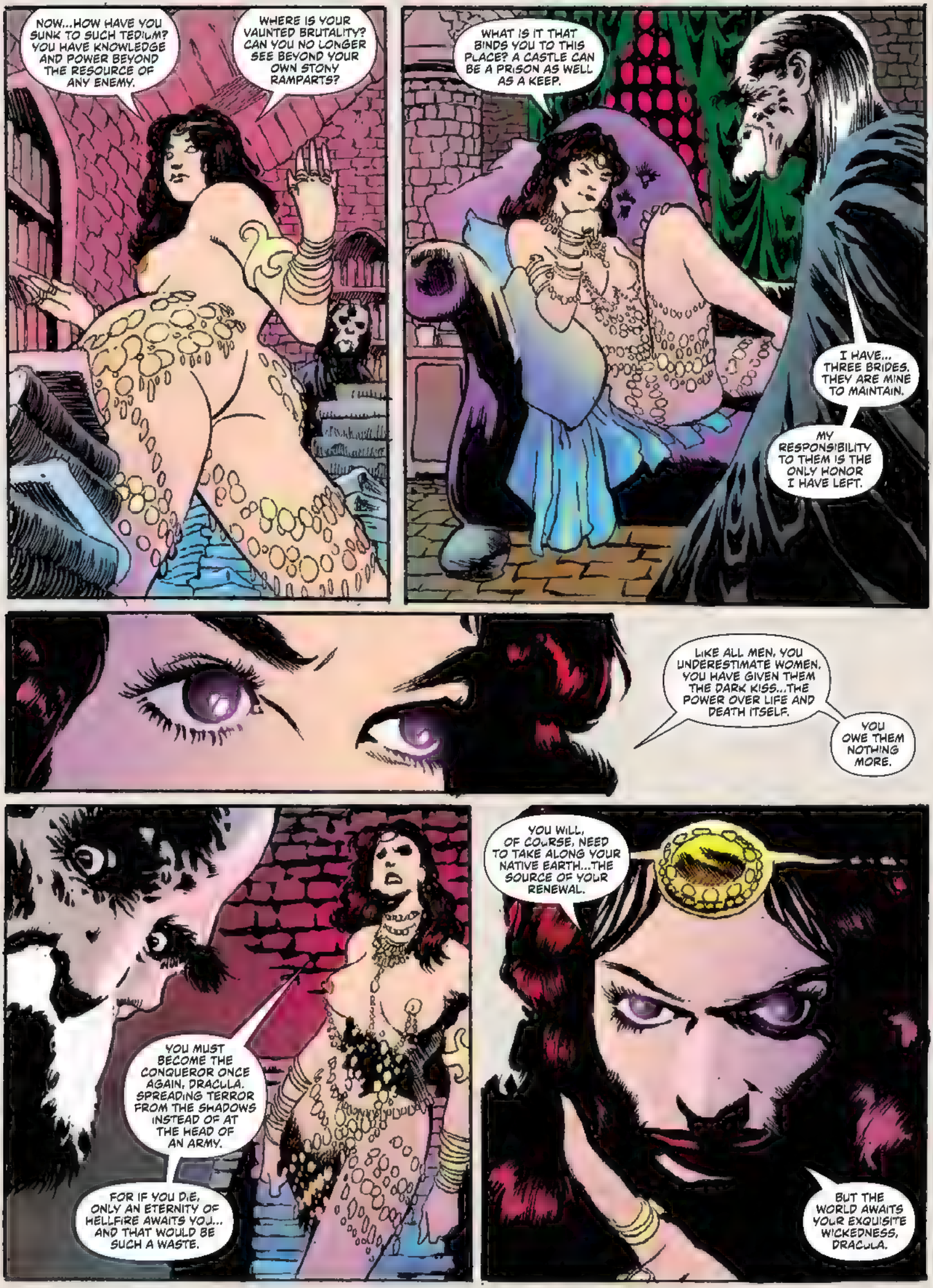
AND, EVEN THOUGH I CAST NO REFLECTION IN ANY SURFACE, THE SIGHT OF MY HANDS MARKED THE PASSAGE OF TIME... AND MY LOSS OF VITALITY.

THE BRIDES, EVER RAVENOUS, SOMEHOW ESCAPED THE RAVAGES OF SUCH FAM NE.
PERHAPS THEIR LUNAR FEMININITY PROVIDED THEM SOME ARCANE IMMUNITY.

NIGHTS RAN ONE INTO THE OTHER WITH A MIND-NUMBING SAMENESS.

until finally, I sought counsel from the only source that might alleviate my ennui.
satan's mirror... of which I had retained one final request.
IF I AM YOUR "CHAMPION," I HAVE PRECIOUS LITTLE VICTORY TO SHOW FOR IT.
IS THERE NO CHALLENGE LEFT FOR MY INFERNAL AGENCY? NO AVENUE IN WHICH TO CHANNEL MY NATURAL FEROCITY?
WHAT AM I TO DO?
YOU CAN START BY SOUNDING A BIT LESS PATHETIC.

SO YOU ARE LUCIFER'S INFAMOUS CHAMPION?
THE CUNNING "IMPALER"... THE VAMPIRE "LORD" WHOSE LEGEND MAKES EVEN PRIESTS SHIVER IN THEIR BEDS.
YOU SEEM TO ME... UNDERWHELMING.
WHO ARE YOU, WENCH? WHERE IS HIS SATANIC MAJESTY?
YOU THINK HE HAS THE TIME TO ANSWER EVERY DARK PRAYER AND ORACULAR REQUEST? HE SENT ME TO DEAL WITH YOUR... CRISIS OF FAITH.
I AM LILITH... THE FIRST TO RECEIVE LUCIFER'S DARK KISS. THE FIRST OF OUR KIND.
BUT...HE SAID THAT I WAS THE FIRST TRUE VAMPIRE!
HA! HE LIED.
HE DOES THAT.


NOW...HOW HAVE YOU SUNK TO SUCH TEDIUM? YOU HAVE KNOWLEDGE AND POWER BEYOND THE RESOURCE OF ANY ENEMY.
WHERE IS YOUR VAUNTED BRUTALITY? CAN YOU NO LONGER SEE BEYOND YOUR OWN STONY RAMPARTS?
WHAT IS IT THAT BINDS YOU TO THIS PLACE? A CASTLE CAN BE A PRISON AS WELL AS A KEEP.
I HAVE... THREE BRIDES. THEY ARE MINE TO MAINTAIN.
MY RESPONSIBILITY TO THEM IS THE ONLY HONOR I HAVE LEFT.
LIKE ALL MEN, YOU UNDERESTIMATE WOMEN. YOU HAVE GIVEN THEM THE DARK KISS...THE POWER OVER LIFE AND DEATH ITSELF.
YOU OWE THEM NOTHING MORE.
YOU MUST BECOME THE CONQUEROR ONCE AGAIN, DRACULA. SPREADING TERROR FROM THE SHADOWS INSTEAD OF AT THE HEAD OF AN ARMY.
FOR IF YOU DIE, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF HELLFIRE AWAITS YOU... AND THAT WOULD BE SUCH A WASTE.
YOU WILL, OF COURSE, NEED TO TAKE ALONG YOUR NATIVE EARTH...THE SOURCE OF YOUR RENEWAL.
BUT THE WORLD AWAITS YOUR EXQUISITE WICKEDNESS, DRACULA.

SEE THAT THEY FULLY SUFFER ITS SYMPHONY OF DREAD...
AT LAST, THE VEIL HAD PARTED AND I CLEARLY SAW THE LIMITATIONS OF MY SPHERE.
THE BRIDES WERE NO LONGER MY CONCERN. THEY MUST NOW FEND FOR THEMSELVES.
AND I MUST LEAVE THIS PLACE, AS LILITH SAID. SPREADING THE PLAGUE OF MY BLOOD LUST TO A FAR MORE VITAL PLACE.
AND THE CHOICE OF WHERE WAS OBVIOUS.
WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN MERELY A CONTENTIOUS ISLAND REALM... HAD SINCE BECOME THE CENTER OF THE ENTIRE WORLD.
A SPRAWLING EMPIRE UPON WHICH, IT WAS SAID, THE SUN NEVER SET.
ANGLIA

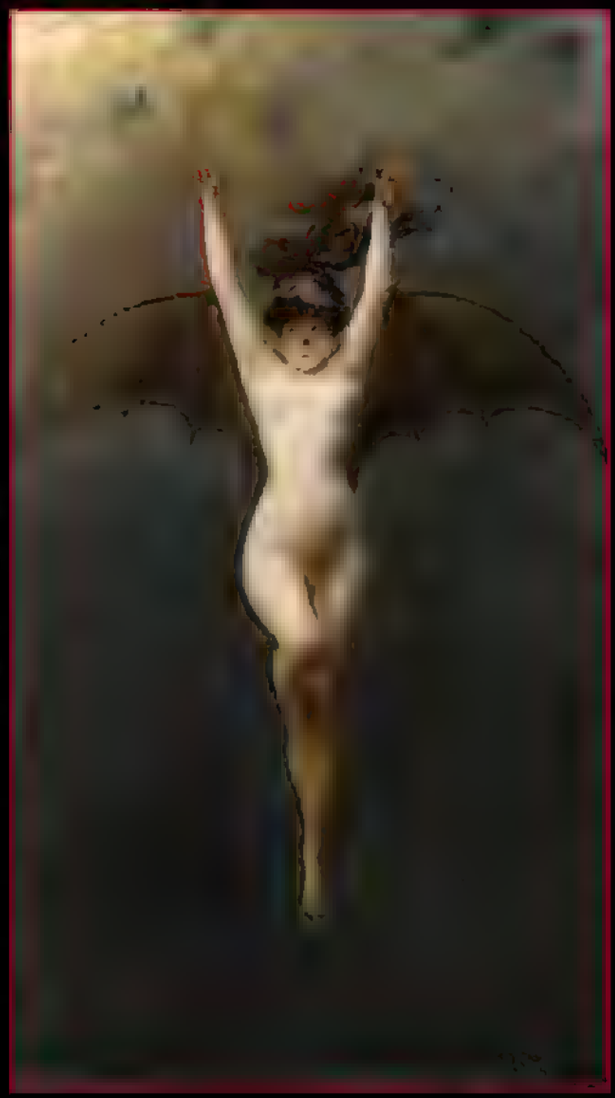
Like a starving scholar, I immersed myself in English history and culture.
I spent years formulating my plans.
I established contacts and sought out advice.
My excitement grew to exper ence the crowded streets of London-- to be amid the whirl and rush of so much humanity.
Finally, I enlisted the services of a reputable law firm to facil.tate the acquisition of real estate.
But how best to present myself?
English culture is sustained by class and nobility, as is proper.
DEBRETT'S COMPLETE PEERAGE of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland

STILL...THEY WOULDN'T RECOGNIZE THE EMINENCE OF A "VOIVODE."
IF I WAS TO FULLY EXPLORE THE BEATING HEART OF THIS EMPIRE I MUST BEAR A TITLE OF RANK AND CONSEQUENCE.
YET THE MOST ACCURATE TRANSLATION--"WAR PRINCE"--MIGHT PROVE CUMBERSOME...AND ATTRACT UNWANTED ATTENTION.
AND THUS, I BECAME...
Count Dracula!

THE END of BOOK 2

"THEN THE HORROR OVERCAME ME, AND I SANK DOWN UNCONSCIOUS."

A deep longing, combined with an existential dread. An overwhelming and dark desire, coupled with the certainty of impending death itself. Such is the deadly and erotic conundrum Jonathan Harker tries to convey in his journal entries when he first encounters three sinister vampire women in the castle and on the pages of Bram Stoker's classic gothic novel, *Dracula*. As with so many other aspects of this unforgettable tale, the onstage appearance of these deadly sirens is as undeniably memorable as it is surprisingly brief.



LA FEMME CHAUVE-SOURIS BY ALBERT JOSEPH PENOT

In the earliest sections of the novel, during Harker's journey to Castle Dracula for the purposes of acting as the Count's solicitor in regard to a real estate purchase in London, the young British traveler soon realizes that he is, in fact, his strange host's prisoner rather than merely his guest. At one point, Dracula cautions his visitor to respectfully avoid any area of the castle that he finds locked and, more specifically, to at all costs resist falling asleep in any but his prescribed bedchamber. The castle, Dracula claims, "is old, and has many memories, and there are bad dreams for those who sleep unwisely." But, of course, Harker's plucky Victorian spirit rebels at these restrictions, causing him to defy all warnings, and he ventures into areas of the keep as yet unexplored. Soon enough, he begins to feel sleepy . . . perhaps unnaturally so . . . and thus he finds himself surrounded by the castle's other vampiric residents—the Brides of Dracula!

Although they are never, in fact, referred to as Dracula's "brides" in Stoker's narrative, we can assume that these three hellish creatures are, at the very least, his concubines but also of his own creation. Dracula suddenly appears to disrupt their feeding on Harker and he furiously rebukes them, in the manner of an undisputed sovereign lord. And the Brides respond with emotional clamor, claiming that he is cold and distant, no longer loving them as he did in the past, an accusation that he protests. It's from these few lines of dialogue that the notion that these devils who were once women are, in fact, Dracula's harem of wives finds its source. Although they appear again later in the narrative when the British heroes are chasing Dracula back to his castle from several different directions, it is this brief scene . . . less than ten paragraphs . . . that indelibly established them as part of the Dracula legend.

Vampires have long been associated with sexuality. From the earliest legends of succubi, female demons or entities that seduce men

through their dreams and thus suck away their life force, to the Victorian-era incarnation in Carmilla, a vampire who nurtures a consumptive relationship with lesbian overtones in the novella by Sheridan Le Fanu, the vampiric act of drinking blood is often seen as a metaphor for both the sensual pleasures as well as the bodily dangers of sex. In fact, vampirism itself can be seen as a sexually transmitted disease, involving seduction, penetration, and ultimately infection—a pestilence that is spawned by desire and leads to corruption.

All of which provided Kelley Jones and myself with yet another incredibly ripe canvas on which to further pursue and portray the stories hidden in the shadows of Stoker's original novel. These three monstrous women have proven to be so memorable as to be included in almost every one of the myriad stage and screen adaptations of *Dracula*. But who were they? How did they happen to become not only Dracula's victims, but also his consorts, most likely passing centuries of time at his side? These were the questions we set about answering in this second volume of our ongoing series, *Dracula Book 2: The Brides*. There is precious little detail to be garnered and from which to work in the novel itself. Other than the fact that one of the Brides appears to be fairer than her sisters and, if not aristocratic, at least of a higher social class, almost nothing emerges from Stoker's narrative to distinguish the three from one another, much less provide any backstory or motivations. We were determined to fill in these tantalizing gaps in the classic narrative.

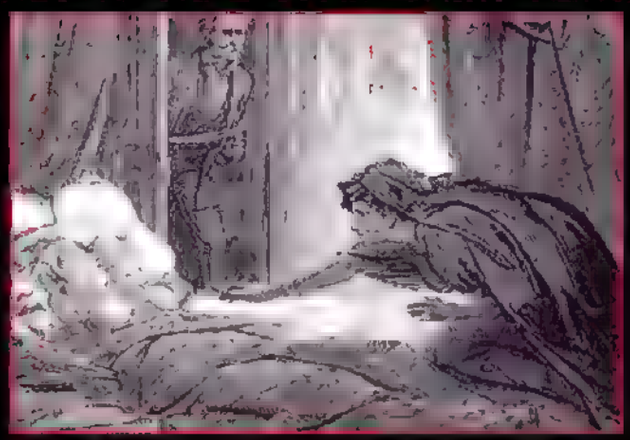


ILLUSTRATION FROM CARMILLA BY SHERIDAN LE FANU, ART BY D. H. FRISTON

Most important of all was to make sure that each of the Brides was portrayed as a distinct individual, a unique woman with a compelling backstory and her own personality. They had to stand out not only from each other but also from their contemporaries; what aspects of their personas would have not only drawn Dracula to them but also enticed him to choose them as one of his companions? In our version of the tale, there have been bloodsucking phantasms from beyond the grave since the beginning of time, revenants and ghouls that haunt and prey upon the living. But it is Satan's unique curse that creates the first true vampire in Dracula himself, a creature of darkness who retains his human cognizance and cunning along with his vampiric might and the necromantic powers learned under the Devil's tutelage. As such, he is one of Hell's greatest champions on earth and yet, after a lifetime surrounded by servants and subjects, he longs for companionship as the decades of his lonely undeath roll into centuries. But he also realizes he must be selective in sharing his dark gift. Much to his surprise, even though he has dispensed death time and time again in a kaleidoscope of grisly manners, these vampire women—his Brides—are the first things that he's ever *created* and thus he finds himself harboring a sense of responsibility for their well-being.

Conjuring up the women who become Dracula's Brides was a creative joy, as was defining their relationships with our villain. Each had to bring a certain "pleasure and comfort" to the merciless voivode . . . and yet each had to also lose some

vital part of their humanity once they accepted his unholy betrothal. His anointing isn't an altruistic offering but rather, as with his every interaction, grounded in megalomaniacal desire. These "marriages" are in no way based on any sort of modern concept of equality . . . again, as with all other instances, Dracula considers himself lord and master over all he surveys. But he soon finds that having created this hellish household, he must now also maintain it, a stricture almost as confining as sleeping every day in a coffin of his native earth.

VAMPIRE BY EDVARD MUNCH

It was also a joy to see Kelley's graphic renderings bring each of the Brides to life (and then . . . undeath), each of them visually based on women that he actually knows (who were all, by the way, absolutely delighted when he told them he was modeling them into one of Dracula's Brides!). As with every aspect of this ongoing project, Kelley Jones, maestro of the macabre, is bringing an A-game to top all his many *other* A-games! And I couldn't be happier than to be here providing the stories for him to draw.

This volume also fills a vital narrative bridge as we witness the centuries of time that led to Dracula's decline and his ultimate decision to abandon not only his Brides but also his beloved homeland and journey halfway across a continent in search of a fresh start and *new blood.* All of which will lead us into our intensive and challenging third volume. Kelley and I agree that this next chapter in our saga is the one that actually excites us the most and we certainly hope that you'll be joining us as the secret history of the world's most famous literary character continues in . . . *Dracula Book 3: The Count!*

Until then . . . hearken to the wolves, those children of the night. What sweet music they make.

—MATT WAGNER

Examples of the original sketches by artist Kelley Jones that were included with the ultralimited edition of *Dracula Book 1: The Impaler*. Each original sketch came in a black envelope with a white hand-printed stamp of the Orlok Press logo.

Unused pencils for pages 57 and 58. Sometimes creation can be a fluid thing and, in this case, writer Matt Wagner wanted to change the action on these two pages for the final narrative. Luckily, Kelley trusts Matt's storytelling instincts and beautifully reworked these pages to suit the amended script.

Seen here are artist Kelley Jones's original concept renderings for each of the three Brides, all of whom were based on women that he actually knows. Kelley says every one of these ladies got an enormous thrill out of the fact that he was modeling them to be one of the Brides of Dracula!

DRACULA
DRACULA
KELLEY JONES

"WOW—IN A GOOD WAY. AND I'M A DRACULA SNOB SO THAT'S SAYING SOMETHING. THIS IS A WILD RIDE THAT SAILS WELL BEYOND WHITBY AND THE BORGO PASS—AND I BELIEVE THIS MAY WELL BE THE BOOK KELLEY JONES WAS BORN TO DRAW. HERE IS ALL THE MOOD AND HORROR I WOULD EXPECT FROM HIM, BUT ALSO A LEVEL OF CRAZY (GOOD CRAZY) THAT I'VE NEVER SEEN FROM HIM BEFORE. AND A HUGE NOD OF THE BLOODY SEVERED HEAD TO MATT WAGNER, BECAUSE SOMEBODY HAD TO COME UP WITH ALL THAT CRAZY IN THE FIRST PLACE. AND A BIG THANK YOU TO BOTH OF THESE GUYS FOR SHOWING IMPALEMENT (IN ALL ITS ANATOMICAL GLORY) DONE CORRECTLY."

—MIKE MIGNOLA
CREATOR OF HELLBOY

DRACULA—THE NAME THAT HAS SPAWNED COUNTLESS NIGHTMARES SINCE HIS FIRST APPEARANCE IN BRAM STOKER'S CLASSIC 1897 NOVEL OF GOTHIC HORROR. YET THE MERCILESS VAMPIRE LORD SHARES BOTH HIS PAGES AND HIS CASTLE WITH AN EQUALLY DEADLY AND TERRIFYING TRIO OF PHANTASMS FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE: THE INFAMOUS BRIDES OF DRACULA! ONCE AGAIN, LEGENDARY COMICS CREATORS MATT WAGNER AND KELLEY JONES WIELD THEIR AMAZING TALENTS TO UNEARTH THE SECRET HISTORIES OF THESE THREE MESMERIZING WOMEN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LORD OF THE UNDEAD. THIS SECOND VOLUME IN AN ONGOING SERIES OF GRAPHIC NOVELS CHRONICLES, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE SEDUCTIVE AND BLOODTHIRSTY HUNGERS OF DRACULA'S CONSORTS . . . AND HOW HE CHOSE EACH OF THEM AS ONE OF HIS BRIDES.

"IT IS NO EASY THING TO UPDATE THE MOST FAMOUS HORROR STORY IN HISTORY WHILE STAYING TOTALLY TRUE TO THE SOURCE MATERIAL. BUT WAGNER AND JONES'S DRACULA DOES IT IN GLORIOUS, HORRIFIC, LOVECRAFTIAN STYLE. THE BOOK EVOKES THE CLASSIC ELEMENTS AND THEMES OF BRAM STOKER'S ORIGINAL WHILE BRINGING AN ENTIRELY NEW LAYER OF ELDRITCH TERROR TO ITS MOST MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER, VLAD DRACULA HIMSELF. I ABSOLUTELY FEASTED UPON THE ART AND STORY ALIKE."

—RYAN CONDAL
COCREATOR/SHOWRUNNER, HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

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